Of Bodies and Things:
The Korean as Commodity Fetish

A Dissertation
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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May 2016

Abstract

This dissertation studies the intertwined construction of national subjects in both South Korea and the United States. Through a transnational examination of Korean and Korean American literature, I track how the impact of these overlapping structures in both nations' remaking of national identity necessitated a re-thinking of the national subject. I propose that the construction of the national subject is embedded within a number of interrelated processes including 1) the neo-imperial entanglement of South Korea with the United States; 2) the modernization of the two nations as not only an economic but also a discursive project; and 3) the spread of neoliberalism and its bearing upon the racialization of Koreans and Korean Americans.

Koreans were repeatedly re-imagined to befit the new social order. By exploring how the figure of Korean is re-situated as an ideal citizen along the axes of immigrants/emigrants and national/alien, I track the changing perception of the nation-state and different forms of national belonging. I suggest that the processes of constructing and reforming these modern subjectivities and of dismembering prior forms of selfhood and social order are rehearsed discursively in transnational Korean literature. In particular, I illustrate how unresolved contradictions and competing social structures are displaced and worked out in the realm of the literary. I contend that the colonial and postcolonial modernization of South Korea, as well as the socio-cultural suspicion that followed Korean immigrants as they entered the United States, produced distinctive styles of narrative inventiveness in subjects who had to negotiate multiple expectations and multilayered histories. I read this stylistic distinctiveness as an enactment of the overlapping histories of South Korea and the United States. Furthermore, my project

questions generic practices of thinking and articulating racial, ethnic, and national identities. In particular, I demonstrate how the transnational Korean novel complicates the national form not only through a re-imagination of the contours of the nation but also through a re-invention of traditional novelistic genres, including the *Bildungsroman*, the picaresque, and the ethnic novel. I consider these traditional novelistic genres in relation to the possibility of co-determining generic conventions and national impositions by examining what might be seen as a singular ethno-racial group—namely, transnational Koreans—who may share this ethno-racial identification but not geographical and national positions.

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Introduction

This dissertation investigates the intertwined construction of national subjects in both South Korea and the United States as well as the transnational Korean literary responses to that construction from the Cold War era to the present. It is a literary project that historically situates the processes of subject-formation and nation-building portrayed in transnational Korean writing. By closely analyzing a number of Korean and Korean American literature, I argue that reading these works together reveals a troubling interwoven history of South Korea and the U.S., whereby both nations learned from each other how to primarily envisage their citizenry through a utilitarian lens. Specifically, I argue that a neo-imperial exchange between the two nations reconceptualized national subjects through an economic calculus that traversed borders. I track pivotal moments from the Cold War period to the present as each nation moved away from desiring a stable ethno-racial populace, and instead began to imagine potential value in citizen-subjects who exhibited transnational sensibilities. This process, which I call the "transnationalization of national subjects," positioned both Koreans and Korean Americans as flexible commodities, whose exchange could respectively drive South Korea's unprecedented economic growth and further U.S. Cold War internationalism.

This changing imagination of the national subject, I demonstrate, makes visible the impact of redrawing the shifting line between the citizen and the alien, the raced and the white, and the national and the global. To track the straddling of the national and the transnational in constructing the citizen-subject, my transnational approach reaffirms,

rather than negates, the significance of the national border in categorizing subjectivities and experiences. By exploring how the figure of the Korean is re-situated as an ideal citizen along the axes of immigrants/emigrants and national/alien, I examine the moments when the perception of the national border is transformed. With this, I consider how the conception of the transnational hinges on the national, and ask what the contemporary turn to the transnational approach means. For instance, transnational Korean migration has been occurring for hundreds of years. At which moments does it become legible as such? At which moments does it gain momentum? Also, when are the members of the Korean diaspora claimed by South Korea and the United States as their citizens?

I propose that the construction of the national subject is embedded within a number of overlapping processes including 1) the neo-imperial entanglement of South Korea and the United States; 2) the modernization of the two nations as not only an economic but also a discursive project; and 3) the spread of neoliberalism and its bearing upon the racialization of Koreans and Korean Americans. These three are interrelated processes that cannot be neatly separated. In this dissertation, I explore how the effects of these overlapping structures on both nations' remaking of national identity necessitated a re-thinking of the national subject.

The Institutionalization of Literature in Transnational Korean History

In this particular context, in which overlapping processes of modernization, industrialization, neo-imperialism, globalization, and neo-liberalism unfold simultaneously, Koreans were repeatedly re-imagined to befit the new social order. This process included presenting selected individuals as idealized figures representing in turn

the emergence of a modern Korean nation, a new breed of Americans, and/or symbols of American multiculturalism. I suggest that the processes of constructing and reforming these modern subjectivities and of dismembering prior forms of selfhood and social order are rehearsed discursively in transnational Korean literature. In particular, I illustrate how unresolved contradictions and competing social structures are displaced and worked out in the realm of the literary.

Korean history shows the particularly prominent role of literature in forming the modern subject. This can be noted in the initial phase of Korean modernization that occurred during the Japanese colonial period—which is otherwise known as the era of colonial-modernity.[1] By analyzing literary texts and essays on aesthetics in colonial Korea from 1915 to 1925, Jin-Kyung Lee argues that during this timeframe the traditional subject gave way to the new colonial-modern subject and that this change is closely connected to the institutionalization of modern literature ("Autonomous Aesthetics and Autonomous Subjectivity" 3). The construction of the modern subject entailed the extrication of Korean identity from the traditional forms of patriarchal, Confucian, and aristocratic values, in order to form the modern individual. This process unfolded within the context of what Lee calls "culturalized colonial modernization," in which colonial Japan's mediation of modern European notions of culture came to dominate the understanding of the aesthetic subject as having autonomy and interiority—some of the quintessential values attributed to the modern subject. Hence, Lee contends that "the aesthetic subject, an author and an artist, epitomizing the notions of voluntarism, interiority and autonomy of the Western-style individual, became the prototype of the colonial-modern subject" ("Autonomous Aesthetics and Autonomous Subjectivity" x).

As Lee reveals, due to the ascription of literature's inherent properties (such as freedom, vision, and autonomy), the status and role of literature have been repeatedly renegotiated in critical moments in modern Korean history. It is not surprising, then, that the transnational Korean people's national independence movement during the same era coalesced around texts. In particular, transnational Korean newspapers were central to the consolidation of various anti-colonial and nationalist movements, by tying Koreans in Korea and overseas together through a shared nationalist agenda. Three major transnational Korean newspapers were crucial in giving solidarity and a unified sense of Koreanness to various transnational Koreans who were involved in the Korean independence movement: *Sinhan Minbo* (the *New Korea* newspaper based in San Francisco, which inherited *Kong-rip Sinbo* (Oakland)), *Sinhan Kukbo* (which later changed its name to *Kukminbo* (Hawaii)) and *Taedong Gongbo* (Vladivostok). Others like *Hapsung Sinmum* (Hawaii)[2] were also influential. In 1909 alone, 20,947 copies of newspapers, including the ones listed, were either published in Korea or brought in from outside the country, and they were confiscated for their anticolonial contents. Unlike newspapers published in Korea, which faced a higher risk of being censored and confiscated before distribution, transnationally-based newspapers could not be controlled so easily by Japanese colonial government—hence these newspapers were critical in giving readers and producers a unified sense of Korean identity centered around an anti-colonial and nationalist spirit.

Among them, *Sinhan Minbo* (*New Korea*), the weekly newspaper for the Korean National Association (국민회), offers a glimpse of the Korean American community in this time period. The KNA was founded in California on February 1, 1909,[3] with over

10,000 members spread around the world and with regional headquarters in Hawaii, San Francisco, Siberia, Russia, Mexico, Manchuria, Cuba, and China. The KNA quickly became the central Korean independence movement collective and the leading governing body for Koreans in America. *Sinhan Minbo* was essential in holding together various transnational Koreans in the San Francisco area as well as Koreans residing in other parts of the world.[4] It was widely circulated and had a huge impact. It was initially published in Korean only, but from March 1937 it included sections in English to reflect the growing number of Koreans who are born in America. Articles in the Korean portion included editorials and critical commentaries about the nationalist movement, international politics, current affairs in Korea and abroad, and other miscellaneous topics. The English articles were comprised mainly of literature and advertisements, in addition to translations of some of the key Korean articles. Some of the literature in this newspaper strongly advocated anticolonial ideals; however, to reflect the changing reality of Koreans in America, it also expressed their emerging sense of being Korean *American*. Similar sentiments are captured in early Korean American literature. Some of the key such texts, including the autobiographical *East Goes West* (1937) by Yonghill Kang, *Clay Walls* (1987) by Ronyoung Kim (revolving around a Korean family that escaped Japanese colonialism and settled in California from the 1910s to the 1940s), and *Quiet Odyssey* (1990) by Mary Paik Lee, an oral history that sketches the Lee family's journey first to Hawaii in 1905 then to the mainland, demonstrate the burgeoning sensibilities of new American subjects. These texts evince a strong sense of urgency regarding Korea's liberation—but at times the nationalist agenda is eclipsed by or is in competition with their immediate reality of being a Korean immigrant in white-dominated America.

The shaping power of literature resurfaces in yet another important moment in modern Korean history—during the dictatorial regime of Park Chung Hee from 1961 to 1979 in South Korea. Literary scholar Youngju Ryu in *Writers of the Winter Republic* illustrates how the political oppression and censorship of Park Chung Hee's regime were met with strong literary responses that eventually coalesced to the politicization of content, form, and the institution of literature itself in South Korea. Ryu acutely captures how "the dynamic codetermination of the authoritarian state and the literature of resistance in the charged relationship" led literature and its writers to become the "conscience" of their times, voicing resistance in their work and becoming public intellectuals in the name of art (4). Ryu's analysis makes palpable how literature became the central force of anti-authoritarianism—the main vehicle for the ethos of social change that helped to bring Korean activists together in this era. Ryu points out how the bleakest moment of political oppression also became the moment when literature rapidly expanded in terms both of practice and relevance: "During the Yusin era, literature became the privileged site of representing a sociopolitical reality that directly contested the official narratives of the state, and of interpreting the historical past and imagining the collective future in ways that challenged the legitimacy of the Park regime" (5).

The relevance of literature as a force for social change extended beyond printed pages in this time period. In 1979, the Association of Writers for Freedom and Praxis (자유실천문인협의회)[5] was formed, quickly becoming the key organ for writers who voiced opposition. As Ryu explains, "the arena for literary practice expanded to include the streets, courtrooms, and even torture chambers . . . poems routinely achieved the exalted status of gospel at public gatherings, and names of writers imprisoned by the Park

regime turned into incantations against universal oppression" (5). This function of literature led to an alliance of intellectuals and laborers in South Korea. Students, writers, and intellectuals left universities to join factory workers, forming an intellectual-labor alliance and calling themselves "common people," or *minjung* (민중). The *minjung* movement became one of the main vectors of social change during the 1970s and '80s in South Korea. Namhee Lee's analysis of *minjung* shows that the *minjung* activists also had an impact on literature by reviving the traditional folk theater and creating "*minjung* literature" with a particular nationalist agenda and logic. While there have been many other tenets of nationalism and nationalist movements in South Korea during this time, the status of literature as the vanguard of social change was unquestioned. From the incipient moment of modern Korea's nation-building, literature was considered to have a privileged role in constructing national and individual identity.

Literature has been a privileged site of subject-formation for Korean Americans, or more broadly, Asian Americans as well. The political and social unrest of the Park Chung Hee era, which led many people to leave South Korea, coincides with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 in the U.S., which removed the national origins quota and allowed previously barred groups of Asians to immigrate to the United States. Many scholars interpret the 1965 immigration act as the catalyst for the rapid growth of Asian American literature in the 1990s.[6] To understand the changing social condition of composition for Asian American writers in the '90s, Asian American literary scholar Min Hyoung Song's concept of the "children of 1965" is useful. Under this label, Song groups second-generation Asian American writers who were born after the famous Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and who led the expansion of the field of Asian

American literature. Song explains these writers as "heirs to seismic changes in demographics, political sensibilities, and legal protections, as well as to the four decades of the libertarian tilt in electoral politics that have occurred since" (75). This social context, Song argues, armed the writers with the sensibility to wrestle with questions of difference and race more critically, rather than to internalize the logic of racial management. Their context also led the writers to reconcile various cultural norms and expectations, giving their works a unique vibrancy as they negotiate the literary market and the larger society, whether by conforming or resisting.

There certainly seems to be more than one factor influencing what we see as Korean American literature. Nationalist and independence movements characterize the early Korean American experience and the literature it produced, which was substantively different from the experiences and writings of Korean Americans who came to the U.S. from South Korea during the 1960s and onwards. Considering that the first civilian president to hold office in South Korea was elected only in 1992,[7] we must consider how the particular sociopolitical unrest in South Korea from the 1960s to the 1990s informed the boom of Korean American writing in the 1990s, as well as America's changing legal policies and social ethos after the Civil Rights era.

Tracking some of these different moments in transnational Korean literature, in all of which the social context directly shapes literary conventions, my dissertation seeks to understand how literature offers a glimpse of the social totality[8] and an alternative understanding of reality, even within a setting of multiple forms of oppression, including state-sanctioned violence during the Park Chung Hee era, a racist racial structure, neo-

imperial relations between Korea and the U.S., and the logic of the Cold War world order.

Specifically, both Korean and Korean American literature rely on what Song calls "the protean character" to present multivocal socio-historical pressures, contradictory cultural imaginations, and complementary forms of commodification on both sides of the Pacific. I contend that the colonial and postcolonial modernization of South Korea, as well as the socio-cultural suspicion that followed Korean immigrants as they entered the United States, produced distinctive styles of narrative inventiveness in subjects who had to negotiate multiple expectations and multilayered histories. I read this stylistic distinctiveness as an enactment of the overlapping histories of South Korea and the United States. This reading is informed by scholars including Georg Lukács, Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, Erich Auerbach, and Bertolt Brecht, all of whom understand literary form as thoroughly social. By examining the selected texts' portrayal of the protean Korean subject, I track the literary enactment of the social history, which is an expression and engagement through form.

The selected texts that I will be examining fall under the genre of the novel. This is an intentional choice, as novelistic form can be used to interpret the form of the nation. For instance, drawing on Benedict Anderson's famous understanding of imagined communities, Timothy Brennan points out that the novel's ability to contain calendrical coincidences and variegated class, race, and gender positions within a single bounded form akin to a single community has been significant in creating the conceptual space of the postcolonial nation.[9] With this in mind, I seek to explore how transnational Korean writing allows a questioning of the national form, as it grapples with the processes and

the effect of multidirectional transnational migration. I consider the shifting literary imagination of the national border, seen at times as transgressible or extendable for an imagined community and yet still strongly circumscribed for different groups of people in multiple moments.

Moreover, I demonstrate how the transnational Korean novel complicates national form not only through its re-imagination of the national border but also through re-inventing the traditional novelistic genres, including the *Bildungsroman*, the picaresque, and the ethnic novel. I will consider these traditional novelistic genres in relation to the possibility of co-determining generic conventions and national impositions, with a transnational context in mind. For instance, I will explore whether there are some inherent features of literary genres that are transportable to other sociocultural contexts, or whether by contrast there are some that are only intrinsic to their locale. I will also ask whether generic conventions subvert the nation or support it, and when the nation loses or attains a different form of legibility vis-à-vis novelistic genres. These are some of the questions that inform my examination of the ways in which the Korean or Korean American novel engages with European generic conventions.[10] Korea's colonial encounter with such European traditions illuminates the tension between the national, the colonial, the modern, and the generic in transnational Korean literary expression. With attention to the particularity of Korea's sociohistorical context, I will investigate some of the national and transnational structures that inform literary expression and how they work together or in competition with one another. This also allows a questioning of some of the gaps among the national, diasporic, and transnational.

The history of Asian American literature offers a glimpse into some of the ways that concepts of national embodiment shape literary categories and genres. Asian American literature is not free from the prevailing practice of reading ethnic literature in the United States. Jodi Melamed contextualizes the institution of ethnic literature within American curricula in relation to the spread of what she calls antiracist racism and liberal capitalism. Melamed maps how ethnic minority literature was institutionalized in the mid-1960s with the assumption that ethnic literature offers privileged access to the understanding of race. Situating this trend as one of the responses to manage many race-based movements in the Civil Rights era, she points out how these commodified cultural products came to stand in for people, while the material and everyday realities of race were neglected in favor of consuming commodified form of culture. This context forces a consideration of the specific conditions under which minority literatures in the U.S. are produced, and how writers must negotiate questions of marketability, intelligibility, exocitization, and liberal multiculturalism that cannot simply be jettisoned if they want to have their works published. However, as much as the circumstances that Melamed delineates reveal the hold of neoliberal capitalism in the U.S. and the difficulties of conceptualizing Asian Americans outside of these economic terms, I want to assert that Asian American literature and criticism can still show the vibrancy and resilience of literary responses to these social conditions.

With this context in mind, Stephen Hong Sohn examines the tendency in twentieth-century Asian American narrative texts to adhere to two categories: the autobiography/memoir or the ethnoracial *Bildungsroman*. Even though the generic conventions of the two are different, they share the tendency of being narratives of

development. Sohn attributes this generic tendency to the material effects of race on "bodies, lives, *and* corresponding acts of creative expression" (1). He considers the material impact of race on representative practice as it constructs a genre as "a "racial form," precisely because sociohistorical circumstances exert influence on modes of literary expression" (5). If, as Sohn suggests, generic conventions and the materiality of race bear on each other, what can be learned by thinking through national and ethno-racial identity as expressed in the representational practices of a nationally circumscribed literature?

One of the possible answers can be gleaned from the field of Asian American literary studies. Frank Chin famously accused Maxine Hong Kingston of selling out on the basis of her autobiography, *The Woman Warrior*. He cast suspicion on this "confessional" narrative that promised to capture "authentic Asian American experience" for white audiences.[11] Though Chin's hyperbolic style of polemic no longer sets the tone for Asian American literary critique, it initiated a continued line of question about how the determinations of genre impact the way ethnic texts are read, and how generic interventions are thought to stem from engaging the social context. In liberal multicultural America, where the literary value of Asian American literature is often thought to derive from its representational authenticity, *The Woman Warrior* was questioned by both Asian American and non-Asian American critics for whether it was an "authentic" representation or not. The tension around *The Woman Warrior* stemmed from Kingston's liberty in portraying Chinese culture: some Chinese American critics read her liberal adaptation of traditional folktales and Chinese language as pandering to white readers' taste. Regarding this issue, Sau-Ling Wong's seminal essay

"Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour" traces how Kingston's text poses a problem to literary critics, especially because its genre, autobiography, earns its purchase by claiming veritable representations, particularity of the author's experience. Wong notes: "[t]he most fundamental objection to *The Woman Warrior* concerns its generic status: its being billed as autobiography rather than fiction, when so much of the book departs from the popular definition of autobiography as an unadorned factual account of a person's own life" (30). However, Wong contends that the questions raised by Kingston's text should not revolve around aesthetic freedom or the faithful representation of Chinese culture, but rather how Kingston struggles with the racial expectations placed on ethnic minority literature to create a different way of capturing Chinese American experience. Wong concludes as follows: "*The Woman Warrior* has wrested from a priori generic categories and cultural prescriptions: the freedom to create in literature a sui generis Chinese-American reality" (48). Wong brings into focus the particular racial expectations that govern the generic encapsulation of Asian American experiences, which not only identifies a conflict but also offers a challenge to the very conditions that make the conflict inevitable. Also, her argument makes visible how an innovative literary response, whether adhering to convention or creating a new intervention, might be too advanced for readers to immediately understand its relation to a given genre and its traditions.

Racialized Commodities: Imagining Korean Americans

My project also questions generic practices of thinking and articulating racial, ethnic, and national identities. I specifically consider what insights can be garnered from examining what might be seen as a singular ethno-racial group—namely, transnational

Koreans—who may share this ethno-racial identification but not geographical and national locations. Analyzing Korean and Korean American literature necessitates a more comprehensive framework for studying the intertwined history between South Korea and the United States. If Japan's annexation of Korea set in motion the transnational Korean migration with its nationalistic and anti-colonial agenda, then neo-imperial relations with the U.S. allowed Korea to see the possibility for economic and political development in systematic migration to other countries. This necessitated the conceptual mapping of the national subject to encompass the transnational.

During the Cold War era, the neo-imperial entanglement between South Korea and the United States led to both nations starting to imagine Korean citizen-subjects as flexible commodities. This structural similarity in the conception of the ideal national subject begins to be concretely articulated in both political and cultural spheres. For instance, the first emigration law of South Korea in 1962 and the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 reflect changing conceptions of national interest, international relations, and an idealized citizenry. The first official mass overseas labor migration of South Koreans exposes how the goal of economic development drove South Korea's foreign policies and domestic campaigns, which imagine Korean people as expendable resources for nation-building. In this time period, overseas labor migration was reframed as an act of patriotism to bring much needed foreign currency for building infrastructure. The first emigration policy was declared on March 9, 1962. While the government stated that emigration and overseas labor were encouraged to promote economic stability, to control population following the post-war baby boom, and to foster diplomatic relations with other nations, Yuh contends that South Korea encouraged emigration "to relieve

perceived pressures of unemployment and to increase foreign exchange earnings" ("Moved By War" 280). This same impulse, suggests Yuh, pushed agrarian, textile, and skilled workers to migrate to Brazil[12], female nurses and male miners to Germany[13], and construction workers to the Middle East; it also influenced the decision to send troops to Vietnam (August 1964). In 1963 alone, South Korea formed immigration agreements with Brazil, Germany, Canada, and more. The making of the law and the first mass overseas migration of Koreans point to the penetration of global capital into the South Korean economy. But also, it indicates the goal of national development the driver of foreign policies as well as the making of the South Korean people as transnationalized national subjects. In essence, each citizen subject was re-defined as an exportable, expendable, and replaceable resource to earn foreign currency as South Korea was struggling to deal with its lack of raw materials or high technology.

A similar utilitarian lens explains the long-standing racialization of Asian people in America, which shares structural similarities with the perception of the *thing*. Asian immigrants have been historically constructed as aliens ineligible for citizenship and temporary sojourners who were brought to the U.S. to meet sociopolitical needs. While the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 replaced the racist national origins quota system with preferences for family reunification and skilled immigrants, scholars like Walter Benn Michaels argue that this change demonstrates the advancement of racial neoliberalism, in which racial criteria is subsumed under economic criteria:

> [T]he Act of 1965 offers preference to "qualified immigrants who are members of the professions or who because of their exceptional ability in the sciences or the arts will substantially benefit prospectively the national economy, cultural

> interests, or welfare of the United States" or who "are capable of performing specified skilled or unskilled labor . . . for which a shortage of employable and willing persons exists in the United States." The 1965 Act, in other words, replaced national criteria with economic criteria; it replaced race with class. (1022)

Michaels illustrates the lurking economic agenda that the law reflects. Indeed, it was necessary for the United States to accept Asian immigrants and encroach upon the Asia-Pacific to resolve conditions following the ascension of the U.S. as a global superpower after World War II. However, unlike Michaels, who considers the racial and the economic in discrete terms, many scholars—including Étienne Balibar,[14] Cedric Robinson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Rey Chow and Jodi Melamed, to name a few[15]—persuasively argue that capitalist advancement took a racial direction; one did not replace the other, but they formed an entanglement of the economic and the racial as a single mode of capitalist advancement. Melamed, for instance, discusses the necessity of capital accumulation and structural inequality to sustain the capitalist structure that was secured through racism: "These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. Most obviously, it does this by displacing the uneven life chances inescapably part of capitalist social relations onto fictions of differing human capacities—historically figured as race" (2). In this passage, Melamed suggests that racism is the modern manifestation of capitalist structure.

Despite dynamic changes in the cultural construction of Asians in America, the perception of Asian Americans has been rigidly marked by race in the larger American

imaginary. Asian American racial difference is read as signaling ontological difference, the undeniable proof that Asian Americans are different from normative Americans. This deep-seated racialization has been indispensible in the making of modern America. For instance, by contextualizing the changing racial meanings of Asian Americans in specific sociopolitical moments, Asian American historian Robert Lee argues that the racialized imagination of Asian Americans has been the generative source of modern American culture and national identity. Also, David Palumbo-Liu illustrates that the construction of American national identity is intimately linked to its dual endeavors of managing Asians in America and penetrating to the Asia Pacific. These two and other scholars collectively show that the imagination of essentialized Asian American difference has been, and continues to be, significant in assuaging various crises in United States' nation-building and modernization. As the two scholars suggest, the perception of Asian Americans takes on diverse meanings and forms at particular historical junctures. Nonetheless, at the center of these cultural imaginations is an ineradicable sense of racial difference.

The preoccupation with race, however, rubs against the prevalence of the neoliberal ideology of our time, which celebrates "individualism, competition, and meritocracy and concomitantly den[ies] the continuing significance of race (Harvey 2005)" (xii). Pervasive liberal discourses have named contemporary American society post-racial and colorblind. In this dissertation, I examine how the neoliberal insistence on a post-racial society and the stubborn conceptualization of Asian Americans as a homogenous racial category produce the particular racialization of Asian Americans today. Specifically, I show how this racialization creates a productive tension between

"foreign" and "domestic"—a transnational flexibility that feeds into economic and militaristic needs.

I hone in on the particular form this racialization takes, when Korean Americans are constructed as both laboring bodies and commodities. This is closely related to the longstanding racialization of the Asian American as a simultaneously laboring body and exchangeable commodity, which dates from the initial mass migration of Chinese labor to the U.S. in the nineteenth century and continues to find its expression in the contemporary construction of Asian Americans as the model minority. Asian Americans have been directly and indirectly managed through labor and commodification, which reduces them to particular kinds of functionalities. This management of Asian Americans in terms of the logic of utility not only predates but also presages the current prevalence of neoliberalism where the market takes precedence over everything. But neoliberalism and the idea of the model minority intensifies even further the existing management of Asian Americans in accordance with the logic of utility.

Asians in America have been utilized as the conceptual opposite against which normative Americanness could be defined, including understandings of citizenship, class, gender, and whiteness; in addition, they have been used to make material the contradictions in America's self-making. Asian American scholars took various approaches to demonstrate this. For instance, Lisa Lowe explores how Asians in America have been selectively included in laboring contexts while excluded in relation to citizenship and legal rights. This, according to Lowe, creates the cultural imagination of Asian Americans as foreigners within, who are distanced from what is considered "American" in the cultural sphere. Similarly, Patricia Chu demonstrates how Asians were

imagined as lacking the capacity to reach modern subjectivity, in contrast to the conception of British and Americans as fully modern subjects, by tracking the development of modern state governance and new ways of subject formation as expressed in twentieth-century British and American modernism. Her work examines how the United States' transition to capitalist modernity necessitated the construction of Asia as its other, not the subject but the object of history. Similarly, Christine So explores how "Asians have been defined in the United States as exceeding the acceptable limits of capital . . . it has been the logic of capital and the threat that Asians present that has enabled the consolidation of the white, middle-class family identity" (10). These scholars, among many others, elaborate on how some of the struggles inherent to capitalist expansion and national consolidation were blamed on Asian Americans, making the management of this group of people important. These contradictions are expressed by numerous state measures that were implemented to manage this new immigrant population, such as immigration laws, court cases, and the Angel Island immigration inspection and detention center; these measures articulate a vision that runs counter to America's self-definition as a universal, democratic nation of immigrants—instead, they expose the United States as "the Gatekeeping Nation," as Erika Lee aptly phrases. Lee discusses the material impact of the gatekeeping ideology: "the construction and closing of America's gates to various "alien invasions" was instrumental in the formation of the nation itself and in articulating a definition of American national identity and belonging. Americans learned to define American-ness, by excluding, controlling, and containing foreign-ness" (41). In other words, despite America's self-making as a universal subject of history,[16] the presence of physical, laboring Asian American bodies shaped how white

Americans considered and read racial Others, immigrants, and national identity. By constructing Asian Americans as the undesirable or the foreign, other groups of people could be measured up in relation to them.

Even at this date, the selective visibility of Korean Americans in the larger American social imagination makes apparent the ideological implications of racializing Asian Americans. Korean Americans are visible in certain social contexts while less so in others. For instance, the Korean American presence is familiar enough, and in a sense, less racially visible, in places such as grocery stores, nail salons, laundry businesses, and lately in prestigious colleges and the IT industry. In other words, the racial difference of Asian American bodies is naturalized in certain conditions of labor. This selective visibility signals the perceived difference of Korean Americans that could still be read as transgressive in some contexts. Yoon Sun Lee explains that the initial perception of the Asian presence in the U.S. began with a sense of alarm, but that their racial difference has become familiar enough in certain contexts over time. This insight points to a construction of Korean American difference that depends on what social function they serve and can be hidden or revealed depending on what labor is needed.

After the World Wars, the Cold War policy of containment led the U.S. Congress to revise a series of anti-Asian immigration laws to accept Asians into the United States.[17] From the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the exclusion of immigrants from the Philippines in 1934, there was a progressive exclusion of different groups of Asian people, who were defined as non-white and ineligible for citizenship. By the Cold War period, the number of Asian immigrants to the U.S. increased due to various struggles in many Asian nations, such as independence processes, nationalist insurgencies, and

ideological battles after the war. A series of immigration law revisions ensued: in 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act (the first exclusionary law that banned Asians from settling in the United States) was lifted; in 1946, two bills that established immigration quotas for India and the Philippines were passed; in 1952, the McCarren-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act reaffirmed the earlier restrictions placed on immigration from the Asia-Pacific Triangle established by the Immigration Act of 1924; that year, an immigration quota of two thousand revised the dramatically limited racial prohibitions. Finally, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 or Hart-Celler Act abolished the national origins quota system altogether.

There was a demographic shift for the second wave of Korean immigrants, namely, those who entered from the post-World War II period to the 1965 Immigration Act. Unlike previous immigration policies, which retained a national origins quota system and favored European immigrants, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act emphasized family reunification and professional immigration, changing the category of Asian immigrants from "aliens ineligible for citizenship" to "citizens." If the political instability in South Korea was a push factor, the U.S. Cold War policy was a pull factor for Asian immigrants.[18] In other words, the necessity to spread American influence, as well as the necessity to compete with the Soviet Union for technological and intellectual advancement, led the U.S. immigration policy to lean on the Asian professional class.[19] In contrast to mostly physical workers in the previous period, the immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s were mostly students, people with professional skills like nurses and doctors, war orphans, and wives and children of Americans who resided in Korea during the war years.[20]

With the end of the First and Second World Wars, the American economic and labor situation changed significantly too. America's economy steadily developed during the war years, supported by increased wartime production and by the patriotic gesture of the laborers and labor unions that maintained no strike policies and refrained from higher wage demands. With the end of the war, however, production decreased and laborers started to demand better working conditions. To address this situation, the U.S. turned to exporting to manage over-produced products, and this necessitated a collaboration with Japan as an industrial trading partner. This condition was exacerbated when the world economy declined and the United States suffered a depression in the 1970s. Manufacturing shifted to importation or overseas production to avoid high wages, causing underemployment. By the 1980s, the state withdrew from intervening into labor conditions in favor of capitalist accumulation.[21]

Commenting on this situation, Jodi Melamed argues that "the stagflation of the early 1970s and the dismantling of Keynesian policy in favor of a free market economy and a state reoriented to stimulate capital growth (rather than to secure the full employment and welfare of citizens)" necessitated "new terms of social solidarity . . . to disguise the disunities of post-Keynesian downsizing at home, capital flight abroad, and the growing class power of elites" (27). Melamed points out that the changes in the socioeconomic structure caused the breakdown of previous relations among people and produced a new set of relations to fit the changes.

These changes in the political and economic condition were reflected in the changing positions of Korean Americans. The Asian American population rapidly grew in size and significance. The strategic coalescence of this heterogeneous group of people

and their growing political activism coincided with the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s, making it less possible to ignore the presence of Asian Americans in the United States. As Robert Lee details,[22] Asians living in America were now embraced under the rhetoric of assimilation. The model minority myth, which rose in this context, contrasted with the earlier stereotypes of inassimilable aliens, insofar as it acknowledged and recognized the Asian American presence in the United States in a seemingly positive way. Whereas Asian Americans were perceived as inassimilable outsiders before, as model minorities Asian Americans could occupy a liminal position where difference and assimilability were intertwined. Unlike the overtly hostile attitudes towards Asian immigrants, such as the yellow peril trope, the model minority myth celebrated Asian Americans as the successful minority and as the new beneficiary of the American dream. The myth constructed Asian Americans as hard-working and patient, able to overcome the difficulties of adjusting to their adopted homeland, and privy to higher education and socioeconomic success.

Central Questions

In a way, my dissertation is an attempt at exploring both these pressures on different forms of national belonging and their articulation in different works of literature. I began by questioning how to think about the nationalized categories of Korean literature and Korean American literature, and what it means to think of the two together. The received disciplinary boundaries perplexed me not only as I researched but also as I tried to locate my project as a study of national literature, transnational literature, or comparative literature. I pondered how best to handle different disciplinary

boundaries, protocols and conventions. And most of all, I questioned the persistence of national categories despite their apparent insufficiency: why do we keep coming back to these given designations determining nation, genre, and discipline, even as we continually experience their limitations?

Formed in the nexus of these questions, then, my dissertation will address the following central questions: How do Koreans and Korean Americans become idealized citizen-subjects? What could be some of the sociopolitical forces that necessitate the reconceptualization of these groups of people as "citizens"? What ideological and physical disciplining ensues for these claimed people? My dissertation seeks to capture moments when the commodification of the subject fails, falls short, or backfires, as imagined by transnational Korean writings. This also provides a way to consider the relevance, meaning, and role of literature in constructing national and individual identity. I attempt to grapple with how and why literature was and continues to be the site of negotiation, where various social contradictions are continually displaced, re-enacted, resolved, and challenged.

Chapter Summaries

My first chapter "Sensing Stasis: Aestheticizing Post-War South Korea in Chŏng-hŭi O's "The Chinese Street"" tracks South Korean writer Chŏng-hŭi O's aesthetic engagement with the South Korea's blighted modernity. By closely analyzing O's short story "The Chinese Street" (1979), I propose that O's aesthetic endeavor questions both internal and external political structures that loom over South Korean modernity: first, successive authoritarian regimes after the Liberation, which promoted the ideologies of

developmentalism and ethnic nationalism to legitimize their rule; second, the colonial and imperial influences in South Korea that endured after the Liberation, which too was repeated by Korean dictatorial regimes. My reading suggests that despite the surface propaganda of progress and development, these political structures interrupted the achievement of political maturity in South Korea and furthered South Korea's dependence on the United States. Also, I suggest that O's illustration of the construction of the ideal national body and the ostracism of less than ideal subjects allows a glimpse of the already transnationalized nature of South Korea as well as the future emigrants to the United States.

While the opening chapter focuses on the disciplining of ideal Korean national subjects in the transnationalized South Korean context, my second chapter, "Racial Bodies and Racial Things: The Ideal Neoliberal Subject in Yongsoo Park's *Boy Genius*," turns to how a similar assault on Korean immigrants is found in the United States. For this, I study the contemporary form of Asian American racialization as the model minority, which celebrates Asian Americans as the token of globalized capital diffusion by coupling Asian Americans' imagined capacity for assimilation and transnational mobility. While this racial form positively defines Asian Americans as über-Americans who are adept at making economic profit, I contend that it sustains the racial capitalist structure in the United States. In particular, this chapter examines many moments in Yongsoo Park's picaresque *Boy Genius* (2002) that dramatize the ways in which a Korean American is produced as a model minority through to the conflation of Asian people with Asian things. I trace the history of multiple inflections of American orientalism to show that an overlapping and intermingled legacy of "things" exposes the

Asian American body's history of commodification as thing-like. Park's vision, however, shows that Korean Americans cannot simply be reduced to commodities, but they continually generate excess that challenges and re-defines modern America.

The third chapter, "The Korean Effect: On Writing and Not Writing as Korean American," builds on the previous chapter's discussion of the imagination of Asian Americans as "thing-like" in order to explore the predicaments of Korean American aesthetic production. This chapter attempts to further advance the insights of the previous chapter by localizing the figure of the Asian American writer in the literary marketplace. The conflation of Asian people and things creates the condition for a consumptive reading practice that prefers mediated contact with Asian American culture to actual contact with people. Thus, Asian American writers are often seen as a sign of a successful harmonious multiculturalism that characterizes modern American national identity. I delineate how this generates aesthetic demands and racial performances that Korean American writers negotiate in the composition of their works. In particular, I contextualize the narrative strategy of inserting details that are marked as culturally Korean in Korean American literature to track the complex terrain upon which Asian American writers, readers, and publishing companies communicate. Extending Roland Barthes' famous concept of the "reality effect," I make a case for a narrative strategy that I call the "Korean effect," to consider why and how Korean American writers create the *impression* of Korea in their narrative fabric. By studying Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) and Linda Sue Park's *Bee-Bim Bop!* (2005), I show how neoliberal logic solicits a certain mode of writing and reading, and how Korean American literature has come to bear expectations as an ethnically marked text in the United States.

I conclude with an epilogue "'Rescuing' North Korea: Asian American Literature and the Limits of Empathy." By tracking a number of recent North Korean defector narratives, with a focus on Yeonmi Park's memoir *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girls' Journey to Freedom* (2015) and Korean American writer Suki Kim's memoir, *Without You There Is No Us: My Time with the Sons of North Korea's Elite* (2015), I propose a potential shift in the discursive framework of North Korean people from the absolutely foreign to the next wave of immigrant Americans—which, I argue, should be understood within Cold War logic and unease with the unending Korean War.[23] The Cold War logic, despite its formal transformations, continues to shape the United States' policies and representations of the two Koreas. By mapping the construction of the North Korean defectors as the token of American benevolence and influence, I consider the contemporary racialization and construction of global Koreans. This invites a re-thinking of the ongoing influence of the Korean War and the legacies of the Cold War in constructing national and transnational Koreans in Korea and the United States.

[1] For more on this term, please see *Colonial Modernity in Korea* by Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson.

[2] For more, please see 한국신문역사 *The History of Korean Newspaper*.

[3] For more, please see "KNA" from *Asian Americans: an Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political History*

[4] The colonial government strictly banned the distribution of *Shinhan Minbo* and other newspapers published by overseas Koreans in Korea. By changing the newspaper law (광무신문지법) in April 1908, the colonial government confiscated 58 out of 74 issues of *Shinban Minbo* that were published from March 1909 to August 1910.

[5] The organization changed its name to The Association of Writers for National Literature (민족문학작가회의) in 1987. It once again changed its name to the Writers Association of Korea (한국작가회의) in 2007.

[6] For more, see Ming Hyoung Song, Lisa Lowe.

[7] Kim Young Sam was the first civilian, rather than a military general, to hold office in South Korea after Park Chung Hee. Kim was elected the seventh president in South Korea in 1992.

[8] For more on social totality, please see Georg Lukács.

[9] For more, please see "The National Longing for Form."

[10] Nancy Armstrong suggests that the history of the novel and the development (or rather, limits) of individualism are mutually constitutive. Franco Moretti argues that the formal features of the *Bildungsroman* parallel the restlessness of youth, and that youth is the symbolic figure of European modernity.

[11] Frank Chin's indictment can be found in the introductory essay "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and Fake," in Chan, Jeffery Paul, et al. *The Big Aiieeeee!* New York: Meridian, 1991. Print. This famous incident has been explored widely in Asian American literary criticism, including Stephen Hong Sohn's *Racial Asymmetries*, Mark Chiang's *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies*, and King-Kok Cheung's *Articulate Silences.*

[12] Brazil-Korean migration was first approved in 1962 May through INIC. In November that year, 103 Koreans left via ship and arrived in Brazil on February 12, 1963. In November 1963, another 150 Koreans arrived in Santos, Brazil.

[13] On December 21, 1963, South Korean miners first landed in Germany. These *Gastarbeiters*, or guest workers, were the first Asian migrant workers in Germany. Nurses followed on October 2, 1966.

[14] While Melamed speaks of the inextricability of capitalist advancement and racism, Balibar specifies the ways in which a social group, i.e., laborers, becomes racialized under capitalism. He explains that class struggle is at the root of racism. According to him, racism is a configuration of a class struggle that is displaced as a national struggle: "class conflict is always already transformed by a social relation in which there is an inbuilt tendency to racism" (205). In other words, race plays a significant role in identifying "the inequality of social classes as inequalities of nature" (207). Hence he tracks the ways in which class situation and ethnicity are conflated, generating anti-immigrant sentiments. He demonstrates that socioeconomic categories, such as the laboring class, are confused with anthropological and even moral categories, such as the dangerous class, which then produces "all the variants of sociobiological (and also psychiatric) determinism, by taking pseudoscientific credentials from the Darwinian theory of evolution,

comparative anatomy and crowd psychology, but particularly by becoming invested in a tightly knit network of institutions of social surveillance and control" (Balibar 209).

[15] Rey Chow tracks how the "ethnic" as a racialized category comes to be produced in capitalist societies. Chow explains that ethnicity accrues cultural meaning through the division of labor, one that exceeds a conventional description of specific culture: "A laborer becomes ethnicized because she is commodified in specific ways, because she has to pay for her living by performing certain kinds of work, while these kinds of work, despite being generated from within that society, continue to reduce the one who performs them to the position of the outsider, the ethnic" (*Protestant Ethnic* 35). Through this process, the ethnic becomes "a society's way of projecting onto some imaginary outside elements it deems foreign and inferior," and therefore it is "virtually society's mechanism of marking boundaries by way of labor" (*Protestant Ethnic* 35). Chow explains that the production of the ethnic is determined in relation to the division of labor, rather than the specificity of culture or national origin. She focuses on the penetration of capital in our perception of people, specifically in compartmentalizing people into the ethnic and the non-ethnic. In this scheme, racial discrimination is a manifestation of class dynamics and state governance, built into the capitalist structure of the society.

[16] Christopher Bush, "The Ethnicity of Things in America's Lacquered Age."

[17] The migration of the professional class expanded ever further after the 1965 Immigration Act. Shelley Lee explicates: "[p]olicy adjustments included reserving 30 percent of the slots under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 for scientists and skilled professionals and 50 percent of the quotas under the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 for skilled immigrants, specifying 'college professors, chemists, meteorologists, physicians and surgeons, dentists, nurses, veterinarians, engineers, tool designers, draftsmen. . . foreign exchange students to apply for permanent status and naturalization as quota immigrants after earning their degrees and securing sponsorship by an American firm.'" (253)

[18] See Elaine Kim, Shelley Lee, and Ji-Yeon Yuh, for more. For instance, historian Ji-Yeon Yuh points to the political unrest and social restructuring following the Korean War as directly resulting in the second wave of Korean migration—hence she labels these postwar emigrants as "refuge migrants" in her important work "Moved By War: Migration, Diaspora and the Korean War." She explains that despite their surface status as immigrants rather than refugees, the perceived danger and disorientation of the war and its consequences pushed these people to migrate. This desire to leave coincided with the South Korean government's concerns about overpopulation and unemployment, leading to the 1963 Emigration Act encouraging South Koreans to migrate abroad. Just two years later, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed these refugee migrants to enter the United States in unprecedented numbers. Also, Woo Moo Hurh makes a significant point about rising Korean immigration during the 1970s: "so-called guided capitalism took a heavy toll, particularly on the underprivileged, due to labor exploitation, violation of human rights, invisible corporate crimes, government corruption, and social dislocation of various classes of the population. It is ironic that Korean immigration to the United States increased rapidly during he decade of the 1970s, when an 'economic miracle' was supposedly happening in South Korea under Park Chung Hee's guided capitalism. Actually, Korean immigration to the United States continued to increase and reached its highest peak in 1987" (8-9).

[19] Shelley Lee 253

[20] Among this new group of immigrants, military brides formed the largest group of Korean immigrants, redressing the previous gender imbalance of Korean immigrants. In 1965, roughly 82 percent of Korean immigrants were female. Wives and children of American sojourners have been steadily entering the U.S. mostly through non-quota categories such as the War Brides Act of 1945, the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, and the Refugee Act of 1953, ever since the 1924 Immigration Act excluded citizens from Japan and Korea.

[21] See chapter 5 "The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority Myth" from Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture.*

[22] For more, please see Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture.*

[23] The phrase, the "unending Korean War," is taken from Christine Hong's introduction to the special issue of *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique,* "The Unending Korean War."

Chapter 1

Sensing Stasis:
Aestheticizing Post-War South Korea in Chŏng-hŭi O's "The Chinese Street"

In "The Chinese Street,"[1] Chŏng-hŭi O aestheticizes the unique and difficult project of South Korea's postcolonial reconstruction while critiquing the ideological pretense of the country's blighted modernity. By the time this short story was written in 1979, South Korea had gone through tremendous economic development and social change. However, the miraculous development was wrought by sacrificing democratic maturity and the individual lives of Korean people, especially the working class. In this chapter, I demonstrate that the text articulates the prevalent mood of frustration and the metaphor of stunted growth in the immediate post-Korean War era that contrasts with the rapid surface social changes. Specifically, I suggest that O's aesthetic endeavor questions both internal and external political structures that loom over South Korean modernity: first, successive authoritarian regimes after the Liberation, which promoted the ideologies of developmentalism and ethnic nationalism to legitimize their rule; second, the colonial and imperial influences in South Korea that endured after the Liberation, which too was repeated by Korean dictatorial regimes. Despite the surface propaganda of progress and development, O's aesthetic captures these political structures' interruption of the achievement of political maturity in South Korea.

In particular, I illustrate how O posits a child-like engagement with the period's social reality as the new site for the formation of an alternative national consciousness. In

the text, children retain a pre-symbolic ability to sense ideological structures and to engage with society in meaningful ways. The children's psychic vitality leads them to resist production and reproduction, in direct contrast to the various adults in the text, whose ideological saturation turns them into mindless subjects. This also allows the children to see through the disciplining of the national body, which requires certain ideological and physical labor. Specifically, the child protagonist's sensory experience of this ideological terrain, captured in her olfactory and visual sense (indicated in the story by the synesthetic phrase "the scent of yellow,") provides glimpses of the revolutionary possibilities that are already contained in the present, or what Raymond Williams suggested by his concept "structure of feeling." With that in mind, I contend that this text's composition during the peak of Park Chung Hee's repressive dictatorial regime suggests that it was possible to have alternative visions of the present and future despite their being little material evidence of transformative change occurring during this troubled period.

Situating "The Chinese Street"

Ever since Korea entered modernity with the forced opening of its ports to foreign nations, Korean society had to constantly rebuild and restructure. There were many factors that caused radical change in the social structure such as the sudden influx of foreign cultural influences; Japanese colonialism from 1910 to 1945; World War II, which resulted in the division of Korea along the 38th parallel; the trusteeship of a divided Korea with the Soviet Union in the North Korean government and the United States in the South Korean government; and the Korean War that followed (1950-53). These

events led the nation to remake itself repeatedly without time to adapt or plan. By the time the Korean War ended, Korea was deep in destruction and abject poverty, and there was the urgent need to rebuild the nation. Since the war is considered to have ended with the armistice (though a peace treaty was never signed), the uncertainty of Korea's reunification led to concurrent feelings of danger and hope.

A prominent writer in Korea, Chŏng-hŭi O is well known for her exploration of psychological interiority and attention to female consciousness during this rapidly changing period. Many Korean scholars read "The Chinese Street" as an important feminist text that portrays the changing understanding and position of women in post-war Korea. However, her works are seldom studied in the U.S., even though she is one of the better-translated authors from South Korea. In the U.S., literary scholar Jin-Kyung Lee's article, "National History and Domestic Spaces: Secret Lives of Girls and Women in 1950s South Korea in Chŏng-hŭi O's "The Garden of Childhood" and "The Chinese Street,"" stands as the only academic study published on O.

Jin-Kyung Lee reads "The Chinese Street" as a feminist interpretation of the Korean War and the post-Korean War era. For Lee, the story complicates the commonplace national imagination of this time, which is dominated by male-oriented mnemonics and historiography. Lee argues that "The Chinese Street" establishes the post-Korean War era as "the inaugurating moment when women's social and economic role set out on a new path in South Korea, i.e, when the triple alliance among patriarchy, the authoritarian state, and the hegemony of U.S.-led global capital was first formed" (("National History and Domestic Spaces" 70). Lee astutely contextualizes "The Chinese Street" within the immediate post-Korean War period as well as in the time the story was

written (the 1970s and 80s), indexing the structure of exploitation that began under Syngman Rhee's rule[2] and persisted during the subsequent authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee and then Chun Doo Hwan.[3]

While Lee traces the changing positions of women in this context, she groups girls and women together, fully subsuming both of these groups under a unified gender-determined social position. In contrast, I argue that O complicates the role that young girls play within Korea's ideological operations; they are unlike the adults, who placidly conform, as they are fully saturated with the national ethos. While South Korea sought to subsume women for reproductive and manual labor, the girls in the text resist such ideological subjugation and stake out their position as they engage with daily activities. In particular, young girls and boys form an alternative community, which contrasts with the state imperative of a homogenous ethnocentric community. The children show that blood ties do not automatically generate affinity; instead, the children bond through shared experiences that fall outside social norms.

Set in South Korea in the 1950s, "The Chinese Street" tracks "structures of feeling" that evade the state-centered obsession with nation building in post-Korean War South Korea through the eyes of an unnamed female child protagonist. Adults are thoroughly committed to the national ideology of development; they mindlessly engage in industrial production and sexual reproduction, devoid of individual and private desire. In contrast, the protagonist and her young friends exhibit strong aversions toward regularized production and adults who are embedded in it, symbolizing their distance from the ideology of developmentalism. Children dream of growing up to have a different life from their parents. This desire for a change manifests through an attraction

to foreign commodities, things that are located within their immediate social environment of transnational South Korea but that the adults fail to register as part of their social structure. However, the text does not romanticize children, and illuminates the limits of resistance to ideological subjugation. Despite their opposition, the ideology will eventually seep into all levels of society, and the children grow up to enter the social structure just like the adults they used to detest. Instead of standing as fully realized models of emancipation, it is the perspective that the children generate during childhood that is valuable for the reader.

The achievement of "The Chinese Street" is that it traces the children's uneasy navigation of this ideological terrain, whose aversions, hopes, dreams, as well as protestations are symptomatic of South Korea's contradictory modernity. O emphasizes how the protagonist's experiences, thoughts, and senses are situated in this *social structure*, instead of framing them as a disconnected individual struggle. The children, especially the protagonist, release conflicting sentiments, experiences, and expectations, which bear the trace of the competing ideologies that emerged during the transformation of post-War Korea's social structure. By presenting the process of the protagonist's conflicted internalization of the state ideology, O makes clear that the protagonist's perspective is born out of an active interaction with a society in the making.

A transnational methodology reveals "The Chinese Street" to be a unique postcolonial text that complicates the unsettling of state and imperial ideology in this era. By focusing on the domestic politics of Korea, Lee's analysis does not address Korea's position in the world system; however, my reading emphasizes how this important postcolonial text presents the particularity of Korea's modernity and nation-building in

the international context. Korea is seldom conceived of as a postcolonial state, despite its modernity being interlaced with the history of colonialism and imperialism. The immediate post-Korean War era marks the beginning of the political liberation of Korea from colonialism and trusteeship. However, during this period, ideological subjugation continued due to Korea's strategic importance in the Cold War.[4] Against the Eurocentric conception of colonialism and postcolonialism, this text illuminates the influence of multiple colonial enterprises on Korea. Specifically, O addresses the everyday repercussions of the Cold War ideological battle in Korea, which resonate in turn with the residual influences of Chinese hegemony and Japanese colonialism.

Reactionary Nationalisms

Reading this short story through its colonial history shows that Korea's ambivalence about modernity is derived from the peculiarity of Korea's colonial and decolonializing processes. The rise of modernity in Korea was prodded by external influences that produced an environment where development was constantly checked and questioned. In particular, the emergence of modern Japan and its military aggression against Korea culminated in thirty-five years of colonization. Japanese colonialism diverges from other models of colonialism. As a latecomer to the colonial enterprise, it was heavily influenced by the legacy of the European colonial model, but it took Korea as the testing ground to modify the imperial mission to fit the needs of East Asian statecraft. Colonialism was the impetus behind the subsequent consolidation of Korea as a nation-state, giving rise to the nationalist movement, the peasant insurgence, and the collective resistance to the forced removal of traditional Korean culture. Simultaneously,

though, modern Japan translated Western modernity into an Asian context and served as the model for Korea's modernization and development into its own nation-state. In other words, colonialism led two contradictory impetuses toward nation-building to coexist: on the one hand, an adaptation of Japan's translation of Western modernity, which was understood as a break from traditional Korean culture; on the other hand, the reclamation of a national identity that was believed to be destroyed by colonialism. Therefore historians Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson explain Korea's nation-building as "a twofold task . . . of modernization and the preservation or reconstruction of national identity" (10). As Shin and Robinson point out, conceiving "modernization" and "reconstruction" as antithetical with regard to national identity is one of the biggest characteristics of Korea's modernizing process. It is important to understand the uniquely complex formation of the modern Korean nation-state as different from the Western model. Nevertheless it is inseparable from the consequences of Western expansion, and Japan's mediation of the Western model. Because of these numerous influences, it is difficult to isolate modernity, colonialism, development, and nationalism in Korea.

In particular, the experience of colonialism gave birth to a reactionary Korean exceptionalism. During the Colonial era, many Korean intellectuals responded to Japanese colonialism with nationalist explorations of Koreanness. This necessitated an effort to extricate a true Korea underneath the vestiges of centuries of imperial Chinese influence. Historian Michael Kim explains: "Rethinking "Koreaness" ultimately meant reevaluating China, and questioning centuries of cosmopolitan cultural practices, which [Andre] Schmid describes as a process of "decentering China"" (20). This effort, however, resulted in replacing centuries of Chinese influence with colonial Japanese

influence and the Japanese translation of Western universalism. Its impact on Korean historiography is significant. Japan was a predecessor in reimagining nationalist historiography in the face of the Western challenge. During the Meiji period, Japanese historians took pains to generate a national history that would mark its place within Western historical narratives. Japanese historical narratives in this time period exhibit a strong Japanese exceptionalism that argued for Japan's role in guiding Korea and other Asian nations to modernity, justifying its colonial and imperial practices in Asia. Korean intellectuals responded to such narratives with vehement objections. Michael Kim explicates:

> The predominance of Japanese arguments that belittled Korean history led Korean intellectuals like Shin Chae-ho, Choe Nam-seon (1890-1957), and Jeong In-bo (1893-1950) to devise alternative historical narratives to discover the dynamism of Korean history. The movement to establish a distinct past that could reject negative Japanese portrayals in the 1930s led to the *Joseonhak* movement, which tried to reinterpret Korean traditions in a favorable light. (25)

Ironically, though, this movement shares much similar exceptionalist logic to colonial Japanese exceptionalism. The desire for a pure national form, simultaneously reactionary and in tune with the modern nation-building processes of many other postcolonial nations, characterizes South Korea's entry into global modernity.

In this context arose ethnic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism was constructed in Korea as an anticolonial response to the ethnicization of Koreans as an inferior group of people fit to serve the Japanese. Jin-Kyung Lee explains how ethnic nationalism became the dominant ideology during the subsequent modernization of Korea, mainly through a

series of coincidences that made the conceptualization of Korean ethnicity and the Korean nation-state a seamless unity:

> The presupposed isomorphism between homogeneous ethnicity, based on a biological notion of common ancestry, and such elements as long-standing territorial boundaries and shared language and culture, has helped to lay the foundation for Korean nationalism since the onset of modernity . . .
>
> Korean ethnicity's essential linkage to the nation-state was forged as Choson—a premodern monarchy whose ideological bases were not ethnic—was transformed into a proto-ethnic nation in the very moment of its demise. Korean nationalism at this particular transnational moment was built on the resistive assertion of ethnic purity that performatively helped create unity and solidarity around a single ethnicity. (*Service Economies* 15)

Korean ethnicity as an ideological construct has gone through a number of transformations, but took shape as a direct response to Japan's colonization of Korea. This ideological construct became even stronger after the Liberation, when Korean ethnicity and the nation-state form were brought back together. The assumption of the "coincidence of ethnicity and the nation-state as a "natural" condition" was in place (*Service Economies* 17).

The political situation further prompted the strengthening of ethnic nationalism. After the Korean War, people attributed many problems in the nation to the incompetence of the Rhee government, primarily to his servicing foreign interests at the expense of South Korea. Syngman Rhee was appointed the first president of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea as well as the first president of South Korea with

the full support of the American Military Government (1945-48) and the United States, which caused dissension from the beginning of his term. Responding to Rhee and the sway of the United States in South Korean politics, various revolutionary movements adopted a nationalist ethos strongly tinged with ethnic nationalism.

By the time Park Chung Hee rose to power through a military coup in May 1961, the condition called for a political leader who would respond to strong nationalism. Hyung-A Kim comments on Park's opportunistic adaptation to the people's wish for revolution, strong government, and independence, which foreclosed "the debate which blossomed for eleven months when freedom and democracy followed the Student Revolution of 19 April 1960 [overthrowing Rhee's regime], . . . by Park's coup of 16 May the following year" (116). From the beginning of his regime, Park strongly mobilized the country for economic growth-oriented modernization, using the rhetoric of ethnic nationalism and developmentalism to appeal to people. Economic growth was indeed imperative in this poverty-ridden nation, but it also served as an important tool to legitimize his authoritarian regime. Park proposed many slogans for national development. Most of them sought independence from U.S. aid and from any relation to Japanese colonialism with explicitly ethnic national and developmetal tenets such as "modernization of the Fatherland (조국 근대화 choguk kŭndaehwa)" in the 1960s, and "National Restoration (민족 중흥 minjok chunghŭng)" in the 1970s. This does not mean that Park actually cut ties with foreign countries. He believed that South Korea needed to learn from the United States and Japan how to achieve the developmental goal. He also knew that South Korea's rapid industrialization was not extricable from the United States' global expansion after World War II and the Cold War. Nevertheless, the violence

and suppression of freedom he used to sustain his regime necessitated his appeals to ethnic nationalism and developmentalism. Even though ethnic nationalism and developmentalism were not Park's invention, he utilized these existing sentiments as his regime's core ideology. As a result, Park did bring unprecedented economic growth to South Korea. Clark Sorensen describes the 1970s as follows: "the period that the South Korean economy began surging ahead and Korea transformed itself within a single decade from a predominantly rural, peasant country to a predominantly urban-industrial one" (289). However, reactionary nationalism and obliviousness toward the everyday repercussions of the Cold War ideological battle remained unresolved.

Throughout this history, a conceptual opposition between globalization and nationalism developed that was contrary to the already transnational reality of Korean modernity. The *joseonhak* movement in the 1930s, ethnic nationalism, economic developmentalism, and other nationalist views in post-war Korea understood nationalism in competition with globalization. This is not separate from the desire to construct a unified modern nation-state that would be powerful enough to fight off foreign influences determining the nation's fate, such as the liberation and the partition that were largely directed by foreign powers. Several of these unresolved agendas coalesced as nationalist views that successive military regimes adopted, views that came to share certain rigidity as they "imagine[d] a single distinct national body that does not allow fully for issues like ethnic or gender diversity in Korean history. The differing nationalist perspectives also fail to account for the many transnational phenomena that crisscross national borders" (Michael Kim 17).

Writing "The Chinese Street" just before the Park's regime's downfall, O imbues the text with the lived experience of the dictatorial state-centered mobilization of rigid nationalisms, namely developmentalism and ethnic nationalism. O's depiction of adult lives stunted by mindless labor questions how much Korea really did develop during the dictatorial state leadership of the 1950s through the 1970s. She also brings back elided aspects of nation-building, such as woman and child labor, and transnational people, objects, and influences within South Korean society, that were expended for the construction of a consolidated nation-state. Through "The Chinese Street," O astutely questions Korea's actual achievement of the two foremost tasks the nation faced after the Liberation—establishing political independence and solving economic challenges, which had somehow become mutually incompatible through a series of authoritarian regimes. Also, her attention to what escapes the narrow understanding of South Korean nationalism attests to dynamic changes in Korean modernity.

Multidirectionality as Stasis

Mirroring the confusion and disorientation of the post-war era, this text couples seemingly opposed forces together, such as life and death, light and darkness, development and stuntedness, and hope and frustration. The Korean War is never discussed directly in the text, but the traces of the war emerge repeatedly, paralleling the simultaneously traumatized yet hopeful consciousness of the Korean people who suddenly faced the task of rebuilding the country from the rubble.

O performs the thwarted development on the level of style as well. The text is narrated by an unnamed female child. She recounts the formative years of her life in

Chinatown, Incheon, to which her family relocated from a country village when her father found a job. Her observations resemble snapshots, as what she sees is described as if she is taking a snap shot of one scene after another, providing the reader with frozen slices of her life instead of developing the narrative in a sustained manner. Most of the story is told as the protagonist leads her daily life, but her mind wanders as she observes what is around her, from homeroom teacher's voice and bombarded buildings to her close friend Ch'i-ok. The order of the narrative follows a series of associations in the protagonist's mind, moving episodically back and forth between past and present, one person to another, and one event to the next. Hence one scene is juxtaposed with the following scene without clear logical progression, and the timeline and events are jumbled. This structure mirrors the time's coexistence of contradictory social atmospheres as well as the structure of traumatic memory.

One of the most prominent and contradictory couplings, however, is that of development and stasis. O reverses the national impetus for development by creating a sense of being frozen at a standstill. Different ideas about the nation's road to development result in multidirectionality, which ironically manifests as stasis in the text. The opening of the text aptly captures this overwhelming sense of stasis. It begins with a description of railroad tracks and coal trains that repeatedly stop and are limited in their motion:

> Railroad tracks ran west through the heart of the city and ended abruptly near a flour mill at the north end of the harbor. When a coal train jerked to a stop there, the locomotive would recoil as if it were about to drop into the sea, sending coal dust trickling through chinks in the floors of the cars. (O 202)

This passage emphasizes limits instead of the mobility, abundance, and profit usually associated with technology. The industrial surroundings are what restrict movement, with the railroad tracks coming to an abrupt end at the flour mill. Yet the flour mill itself is spatially limited by the harbor. Even when the narration moves to the natural environment, the sea is described as what stops the moving coal train, rather than as expansive, open, and alluring. Two competing forces are at work here, namely technology's desire for movement and the limits of an indifferent environment. Hence the train's movement stops "abruptly" with a "jerk" and "recoil[s]," signaling to the reader capital's continual will to move. Even when the coal train is stopped it sends coal dust in motion, but the coal dust can only get as far as the "floors of the cars." This passage traces the prevalent mood of stuntedness and frustration that characterizes the post-Korean War era. The halting textual performance of twisting and turning parallels the demarcation of the country into North and South Korea, just as the opening sentence posits railroad tracks and coal trains as forces that dissect the heart of the city.

Although modernity is associated with movement and change, "The Chinese Street" carves out a different space in it. It is as if the world continuously moves, changes, and develops, but people remain limited by their social station. The exterior environment changes rapidly within the span of this short story: the Korean nation is going through political turmoil; the physicality of the town changes throughout the post-war rebuild; and the protagonist moves around the country during her period of refuge. For such a short story, the author creates the illusion of dynamic life as people age, give birth, and relocate within restricted geographical circuits. However, people in the text are not capable of escaping their current structure of life.

This prevailing mood of stasis is distilled into the imagery of youth that are characteristically deprived of possibilities. Even though "The Chinese Street" portrays the moment of intense social transformations in South Korean modernity, the present condition delimits the imagination of children, making them unable to dream in excess of their present situation. This is a starkly different from Franco Moretti's famous conception of the rise of the *Bildungsroman* in the context of European modernity. In *The Way of the World*, Moretti argues that the transition to modernity caused European societies to find youth meaningful, which they had reserved for adulthood in the previous era. He characterizes youth as symbolic of hope and restlessness for the meaning that resides in the future. Hence he argues that the "*Bildungsroman* [is] the 'symbolic form' of modernity," since the essence of "youth" and "modernity" is that both seek their meaning in the future rather than in the past (5). However, youth necessarily comes to an end by reaching adulthood, just as the *Bildungsroman* has to be formally contained. Taking note of the a priori formal constraint of the *Bildungsroman* in its portrayal of modernity, Moretti draws our attention to the tension in this literary form between constraint and the protean possibilities of what is to come.

In South Korea, the rise of modernity and nation-building coincide with the experience of colonialism and imperialism, a historical fate shared with many other Asian nations. Such entry into and experience of modernity paint a different picture from Moretti's understanding of the European *Bildungsroman*. Paralleling the blighted modernity of Korea as it was shaped by reactionary ethnic nationalism, developmentalism, and dependence on Cold War international relations, the children in the text dream of a future that is not too different from the present. How the protagonist's

best friend Ch'i-ok's dreams and imagination are limited by her immediate surroundings alludes to the structure of this relationship. Her dream is only to run away from home—to be somewhere else—to be physically distanced from her stepmother's repeated physical and verbal abuse. But her desire to flee strangely affirms her stepmother's cruel command, "get lost and drop dead" (O 219). She also dreams of being a hairdresser and a GI sex worker, but these jobs are common in her town, which leaves her characteristically bound by her social station even in her fantasies. Her dreams show how her idea of escape is contained solely in her immediate situation. She can dream of bodily escape from the domestic sphere, but what escapes her present socioeconomic sphere is undreamed of.

The inescapability of Ch'i-ok's current social station is further confirmed by the ending, where her limited dreams do come true. She escapes the domestic sphere, but only because her parents leave town, whereas she is still trapped. Her dream of becoming a hairdresser is partially fulfilled, as she ends up dropping out of the school and working at a hair salon, or the "beauty shop" (O 229). But again, the last glimpse of Ch'i-ok in the text underscores the distinction between Ch'i-ok, who has to work, and the protagonist, who goes to school; this distinction is made more vivid as their encounter is mediated by the glass door between them at the beauty shop, through which the protagonist sees Ch'i-ok busy working. Ch'i-ok's fall is further emphasized by the protagonist's daily observation of Ch'i-ok on the way to and from school: "She would be sweeping the hair on the floor while pulling down her small sweater, which was constantly riding up her back and revealing her bare waist" (229-30). Ch'i-ok suddenly and forcedly grew out of

childhood, both physically and symbolically, and her entry into adulthood begins without a possibility for a better future.

"The Chinese Street" challenges many preconceived notions about modernity with its portrayal of war-torn South Korea. Growth is decoupled from maturation; production is not fruitful or meaningful; and the future is neither hopeful nor unknowable. The text presents growing up as accepting the knowledge that the present structure of life will not change. Chinatown adults compulsively produce and reproduce, but they are drained of hope for the change that the fruit of their labor will. Their mindless labor shows how they have come to accept life as qualitatively unchanging regardless of rapid surface alterations. Likewise, Ch'i-ok's growth reinforces the destitute position of the Chinatown people. Neither present nor future contain protean possibilities; the children's dreams, as well as the realization of those dreams, are contained within the unchanging present. Whether she likes it or not, Ch'i-ok cannot escape Chinatown, just as the protagonist cannot escape womanhood closing in on her. Ideology operates in and through the children, regardless of their propensity, inclination, and belief. The children's desires and aversions are produced in this context as they consciously and unconsciously enact state ideology in their daily lives. They cannot help but grow up to face it as inescapable.

A Family of Children

"The Chinese Street" presents the oppressive hold of dictatorial ideology by showing children's strained growth in this ideological terrain. Decoupled from maturation or future possibilities, growth is marked by life's pangs. In particular,

children's painful physical and mental development is paralleled to their ideological preparation as tamed national subjects. In this light, their resistance to growth can be read as a resistance toward the dictatorial state ideology of developmentalism and ethnic nationalism.

The text accentuates how children have stronger affinity to communities they have forged themselves rather than to the blood-ties that were given to them. The protagonist spends a lot of time playing with Ch'i-ok and a gang of children in the town. Their shared social standing and everyday activities lead them to share a social consciousness that manifests as detestation of ruling ideologies, namely, ethnic national bonding and production-focused developmentalism. This is in contrast to adults' mindless acceptance of those very ideologies. The narration positions adults as peripheral actors in the children's lives. Particularly, the emotional and physical distance between the protagonist and adults, including her own parents and grandmother, is highlighted through this narrative elision. In the rare times when adults are mentioned, they are rarely the active subjects but rather serve as the social backdrop of the narrator's life. Adults are absent from the children's lives. The entire country is recovering from the destruction of the Korean War, and Chinatown is one of the poorest regions in Incheon. Surviving the dire situation alone is enough to consume the adults. They are helpless to take care of their offspring, owing to intense poverty that traps them. The Chinatown children, including the protagonist, are left to fend for themselves, and they spend time stealing coal to trade for food. They loathe the poverty-ridden lives of their parents, especially as the adults' time is consumed by industrial production and sexual reproduction. They eagerly wait to grow up so they can escape their parents' remaining influence. In contrast

to the state's naturalization of the nation by likening citizens' relations to kinship bonds, the strong bonding between the Chinatown children and their distance from adults reveal that blood-ties do not automatically generate affinity. In this way, O juxtaposes the children's distance from their parents and their distance from ethnic nationalist bonding.

However, the text emphasizes the tenacious strength of blood-ties, or the strength of the ruling ideology. The protagonist finds it hard to escape blood bonding, despite her intense resistance toward it. For instance, when Ch'i-ok says that she will someday run away from her stepmother's physical and verbal abuse, the protagonist thinks to herself: "How often I wished I really were a stepdaughter, so I could run away whenever I pleased" (O 219). What prevents the protagonist from running away is the biological link that connects her to her family. In the same vein, Ch'i-ok's lack of a blood-tie with her stepmother causes the stepmother to leave young Ch'i-ok behind as she and her husband leave the town. On the other hand, the protagonist comes to empathize with her mother and even calls out to her as she experiences her first menstruation. The blood-ties, akin to ethnic nationalism, and their shared role as women, as reproductive agents in the developmentalist economy, result in a strong bond between the protagonist and her mother in the end. In contrast, the children's community breaks down and scatters when their growth leads them to different strata of society.

The protagonist's hatred of blood-ties and the demand for women's reproductive labor is particularly explored through her troubled growth into a female national subject. O portrays the protagonist's maturation as a harrowing process, which entails physical and emotional pain as she is forced to accept her role in the social economy despite her

revulsion. The protagonist observes her mother's pregnancy and directly compares the difficulty of pregnancy to death:

> For the first time I empathized with brutish life that women had to live. There was something pathetic and harrowing about Mother's retching, and this symptom of her pregnancy made me plead silently with her to produce no more brothers and sisters for me. I was afraid she would die if she gave birth again. (224)

Rather than focusing on birth or life, the text emphasizes pain and death accompanying pregnancy. Moreover, the distinctive description of the mother's pregnancy as animal-like[5] deprives the pregnancy of romance or sanctity and leaves only the biological aspect of reproduction. Similarly, the protagonist observes her older sister suffering from the pain of emerging breasts: "The breasts were sensitive even to the touch of her sheet, so she tossed and turned, embracing them tightly and moaning" (224). Rather than celebrating maturation, once again the text draws our attention to the pain of growth.

The knowledge of pain associated with growth and life directly relates to the recognition of the harsh reality the characters face. The text points to poverty, in other words, the social condition, as the source of knowledge. The protagonist and her friends know the pain of childbirth because their poverty does not allow them the luxury of protecting themselves from hardship: "None of us children in this poor district next to Chinatown believed that babies were brought to earth in the arms of an angel in the middle of the night. And they didn't emerge smiling brightly from their mother's belly button. Everyone knew a baby came out screaming from between the naked legs of a woman" (O 219-20). The children are not protected from knowing the blunt reality, because they live in the poor district. The condition of poverty strips the adults of the

ability to protect their children from the direct experience of childbirth and takes away the children's child-like belief in fairy tales. Even if they know the fairy tales, their direct experience more strongly commands their precocious knowledge of real life.

The protagonist's several experiences of severed family relations and death leads her to face the painful physical and emotional process women face in this degraded environment. Many events build up to her own growth: her grandmother passes away; Maggie is killed by a black GI who used to live with her; and Maggie's daughter Jennie is sent to an orphanage. Also influential is how Ch'i-ok's life unfolds. Ch'i-ok drops out of school and starts to work at a hair salon after an accident on a production line left her father with a mangled leg. Ch'i-ok always wanted to run away from home and it was one of her dreams to become a hairdresser. Her dream does come true, ironically enough, as her parents leave her behind when they leave the town to look for a new job—but this turn of events is frustrating rather than fulfilling. Through these experiences, the protagonist begins to understand the "brutish life that women had to live," and starts to accept, though with resignation, the life of woman (O 224).

Her recognition leads to the final scene: the protagonist's first menstruation and her mother's labor (with her eighth child) coincide, symbolizing the re-birth of the protagonist. The experience of loss ironically prepare her for reproduction; the death of childhood brings the birth of womanhood. The protagonist's mother, who was pregnant with her seventh child at the beginning of the short story, gives birth to her eighth child. At this moment the protagonist locks herself up in a storage cabinet and there has her first menstruation. The protagonist senses herself being swallowed by the "brutish life" of woman in this society (O 224): "A sense of helplessness and despair came over me in the

darkness of the cabinet, and I called out to [mother]. Then I felt inside my underwear, and finally I understood the humid fever that had been closing about me like a spider web" (230). Her helpless acceptance of the role of woman is signaled both mentally and physically. The pain accompanying her growth mirrors her agonizing transformation into a national subject, who cannot but succumb to her social position. In other words, the menstruation signals the protagonist's symbolic new birth into this society as a woman, whose mind and body are fully readied for physical and spiritual reproduction in tune with the state ideology.

Nevertheless, the ending does not present a telos, or a *bildung* if you will, that signals a happy acceptance of the social structure or a resolution that affirms the absolute inescapability of ideology. The protagonist's acute observation of her social reality allows her the perspective to locate what is still possible within the present. The Chinatown children move in and out of the sphere of ideological influence. They instinctively sense and detest the ideology of production and reproduction, pervasive frustration, empty hope, and communal erasure of the stigmas of the war. Moreover, they engage with their social environment in creative ways rather than merely doing what is prescribed. A perspective emerges from their alternative engagement with the social milieu that is different from that of the fully indoctrinated adults. Even when their hopes and desires—whether located elsewhere or within the limited present—are frustrated, a deep engagement with the actual can give birth to a different perspective. Importantly, the children do not regress back to a prelapsarian childhood; rather, as the following section of my chapter illustrates, they come to grasp the reality of the present, within which the possibility of a revolutionary future can be found.

Reconceptualizing National Subjects

O makes visible that the protagonist's grasp of Chinatown differs from the picture painted by the rigid nationalist ideologies of Rhee and Park's regimes. As many scholars, including Jin-Kyung Lee (2010) and Ruth Barraclough (2012), have demonstrated, the strong patriarchal structure of post-Liberation Korean society emphasized manufacturing labor as the key site for industrial development, while neglecting what made possible the growth of a higher-skilled and higher-educated male work force. In this context, O pays attention to relatively silenced or neglected aspects of nation-building. Specifically, O's portrayal resists Korean male-centeredness and brings to the forefront women and transnational actors instead. O illustrates how the protagonist takes note of those forgotten workers participating in various sectors of the changing society, tracking the shifting roles and perceptions of reproductive labor, domestic labor, institutionally sanctioned labor, and unofficial labor. The protagonist's attitude toward them departs from the nationalist rhetoric in which idealized male subjects were to gentrify the nation—she grasps the present condition of modernizing South Korea in its unadorned, messy, confused whole. Through this, "The Chinese Street" challenges the dominant mnemonics that privilege male manufacturing labor as what led South Korea's modernization. A different understanding of the nation-state and nationalism arises from this narrative intervention. Moreover, by positing children as the privileged subjects to sense this changing reality, in contrast to unreceptive adults, O questions the totalizing influence of the dominant mnemonics to which the reader too may be subject.

O utilizes the narrative elision of male subjects to trouble the official historiography. Men do not appear as fully interiorized subjects in "The Chinese Street." In fact, Korean men are rarely depicted at all. The imbalance between male and female adults in the narrative is apparent. The protagonist observes various women's often-unacknowledged plights and vital roles in the changing society, particularly the social positions of her mother, grandmother, and her neighbor Maggie—the sex worker who services GIs. However, her father rarely enters the narration. Even when he is portrayed, it is not as in action, but rather through reported speech: his inclusion in the narrative consists of the mother speaking about him or of the traces he left behind. For instance, O describes how the mother repeatedly suffers from morning sickness and childbirth, but the father's role in the pregnancy is omitted even though he continually impregnates his wife. Similarly, before his move to Incheon, his presence is marked only by his absence—the result of his frequent job-hunting trips. Even after moving to Incheon, the father remains in the backdrop—his existence evidenced by the shirt that the grandmother washes for him or by the newly added hallway or a room that he constructs, "as if to compensate for the privations of [their] refugee life in the country village" (O 217). In this way, O poses women's direct or indirect participation in the production and reproduction of life as the prime mover of this textual world. This contrasts with the hints of the father's involvement in production—such as building houses and dressing for work—and reproduction, in the form of his diminishing or elided presence both in the text and in the society. As Jin-Kyung Lee comments, ""The Chinese Street" offer[s] the memory of domestic spaces as "countersites" that disrupt the androcentric national history" ("National History and Domestic Spaces" 63). O's representation reverses the

hegemonic mode of remembering Korean modernization as male-centered and challenges the adult male's idealization as the privileged subject of nation-building.

The father's narrative and physical absence in "The Chinese Street" indicates irrevocable changes in South Korean social structure, which people now have to come to terms with. The absence of Korean male figures in the text is symptomatic of the loss of soldiers' lives during the Korean War and the transformation of the traditional patriarchal social structure. Many men were drafted to fight the Korean War and came back wounded or dead. The ceasefire did not automatically lead to family reunion, due to the division of the Korean peninsula and the chaos during the period of refuge and settlement. The extensive loss of soldier's lives provoked calls for strong masculine subjects to rise up for the nation, but at the same time, this condition caused a decisive shift in family dynamics, as previously home-bound women had to take on the roles that men used to be responsible for and find ways to support their families. For this reason, even though male-centered nationalism obstinately resisted this changing reality and persistently posited men as idealized nation-building subjects, O's text lays bare changes that are already taking place. However, O also captures people's confusion in the face of sudden transformations. For instance, the protagonist's mother exclaims in exasperation upon returning from a two to three day long tobacco trading trip, which is all the more exhausting due to her lack of a license for dealing: "If your father could only get a job" (205). The mother has taken on the role of the breadwinner due to her husband's inability to get a job; nevertheless, her lament shows that she has not completely let go of traditional gender expectations, even as she is participating in the changed economy. O

shows the mother as still trapped in the national ideological rhetoric of idealized male-centeredness, notwithstanding her position in the family and national economy.

Another significant transformation O captures is the cross-cultural and international interactions between people who cohabit Chinatown. “The Chinese Street” explores the national imaginary that casts both GIs and Chinese immigrants as foreigners who stand outside the idealized national body. While the text portrays how the intertwined lives of people complexly change the national body, it makes clear that the Chinese and GIs stand outside the dominant national ideology’s reach. In this light, the Chinese and GIs occupy distinct places in Chinatown not only because of their racial, ethnic, or sexual difference, although such differences do matter. In addition, the foreigners’ ability to move in and out of the South Korean social sphere at will signals that they are not contained within South Korean ideology, whether due to their own power (GIs) or the refusal of the South Korean government to accept them (Chinese).

The difference between the protagonist and the Chinese’s positions within Chinatown and the national imaginary is illustrated through the terrains the two occupy, specifically through the figure of the Chinese man next door. The Chinese man’s house is closed off even from the light; only a momentary opening of its shutters allows the Chinese man and the protagonist to meet each other’s eyes. The protagonist sees the Chinese man twice, through the sudden appearance of his face from “one of the shutters [that] opened” from the tightly closed two-story house on the hill (211), and then in the next moment, when “the wooden shutter thumped shut and the young man disappeared” (216). Rather than emphasizing his face or the open window, this passage underscores the closed nature of the Chinese man’s house. Even though the Chinese man and the

protagonist are neighbors, the text makes clear that their lives do not overlap in the normal course of events. In another instance, the two happen to occupy the same space at a barber's. Here too, the distance between them is clear, even though they are in the same space: "The only ones who weren't laughing were the barber and a young man sitting in the corner with a bib around his neck. The young man was studying me in the mirror. He's Chinese, I suddenly thought" (217). The protagonist is fixated on the Chinese man's face, which appears and disappears through the window. But this time, she is able to recognize the Chinese man only when his cultural and emotional distance from other Korean people—and their shared laughter—is revealed. The Chinese man who used to watch the protagonist through the open window studies her through the mirror this time. Physical and cultural distance, as well as windows or mirrors mediating their direct encounter, remain, even when they are in the same space.

O's protagonist is seduced by the way foreign people are unaffected by Korean national ideology, as she is attracted both to her Chinese neighbor and to American things. The protagonist's attraction to these objects and figures speaks to her desire to escape the hold of the dictatorial regime, and to be similarly extricated from South Korean national ideology. In particular, when the protagonist is still naïve enough to channel her desire to what is foreign, the Chinese man living next door stirs inexplicable emotions in the protagonist. Whenever she sees him looking out his window, she feels "[a] mysterious sadness, and ineffable pathos began undulating in my chest and then spread over me" (216). She longs to see his face again and awaits the stimulus he brings. Similar is her attraction to American things. While the protagonist and Ch'i-ok hide in Maggie's room to play, everything in the room—including cookies, candies, perfume, and other

trinkets—enthrall the two because these are "made in America" (215). These objects create hope as they allow her access to a world outside national space. Indeed, these things are tied to Maggie's upcoming marriage and migration to the United States in the spring that the GI had promised.

However, the protagonist soon realizes that she cannot escape the hold of national ideology. The moment when the protagonist realizes that escape is impossible becomes the moment when she helplessly accepts her womanly role within Korean society. Right before the ending, where the protagonist locks herself in the womb-like dark cabinet—an act that signifies her re-birth into womanhood—she meets the Chinese man next door. It is when they finally meet that the protagonist comes to recognize that she cannot share his outsider status in Chinatown. The protagonist sees the Chinese man beckoning her, "leaning partway out the window," on her way home (230). His active gesture of invitation seems to promise a meaningful encounter that goes beyond their usual separateness. This time, he crosses over the confines of the window and opens the gate for the protagonist to see inside: "He heaved open the gate to the house and emerged . . . He offered me something wrapped in paper. When I accepted it, he turned and went inside" (230). The interaction emphasizes his existence in the spatially closed and separated terrain of the Chinese mansion; she may briefly glimpse it but cannot share it. Before this moment, the optical distance between the two sustained the hope that she, too, could share his position. But this physical interaction makes the protagonist recognize that she is not extricable from the structure in which she is embedded; similarly, the Chinese man is attached to his immediate terrain even in the moment when he reaches out.

Likewise, the GIs' freedom to enter and leave Chinatown is reimagined through the GIs' masculinized aggression. The GIs' repeated physical and psychological violence toward Korean people makes the protagonist see the insurmountable power hierarchy between GIs and Koreans. For instance, while GIs are doing target practice with a knife, one throws a knife at one of the Chinatown children, killing a stray cat right a boy. GIs point to the dead cat, giggling, but the targeted child wets himself and the rest of the children are also terrified. The violence intensifies when the black GI throws Maggie off the balcony of the house they shared. O portrays this as the pivotal event that makes the protagonist and Ch'i-ok accept their inability to escape, when they see that the GI is exempt from legal actions due to his extraterritoriality. The night that Maggie is killed, a GI van promptly comes to take the GI as the whole townspeople look at Maggie, dead in the street, and the GI drunkenly chuckling on his way out. O repeatedly underscores the carefree killing of both the cat and Maggie, accompanied by giggles and chuckles in contrast to the frustration and terror of the Chinatown people. The changed lives of the remaining people in Chinatown, as against the easy escape of the GIs, mirror the neo-imperial influence of the United States in South Korea's politics, especially the consequences of the partition that Korean people have to endure. O juxtaposes this event with the protagonist's encounter with the Chinese man to highlight how these foreigners' position within Korean national ideology is unlike that of the protagonist, who is inextricable from her immediate social structure.

Though both the Chinese man and GIs have a similar effect on the protagonist, their different terms of relation parallel the political relationships between these nations and South Korea. The protagonist sees the Chinese and GIs as the embodiment of the

nations they are from, in terms of waning Chinese imperialism and newly imposed U.S. neo-imperialism. Despite a long history of Chinese imperialism and its effect on Korean culture, the ties between Korea and China were weakened with the rise of Japanese imperialism, which vitiated the position of China within East Asia. U.S. involvement in South Korea, since the end of Japanese colonialism, also helped to remove the remaining Chinese influence, which then served to intensify the Cold War alignment of North Korea and China. Such international relations are represented in the text through the disappearing impact the Chinese neighbor has on the protagonist and the subsequent rise in power of the GIs. The protagonist perceives the Chinese neighbor as somewhat unsexed while she perceives GIs as hyper-masculinized. Similarly, she confronts the Chinese butcher on an equal footing, while she hovers around the GIs at a distance. Even the Chinese man, who provokes such strong emotions in the protagonist, is easily cast aside once she accepts their differences, while GIs remain in the town whether the people like them or not. As well, the power of the United States is signified by the *things* they bring to Chinatown, which simultaneously attract, threaten, and repulse Chinatown's inhabitants. These things are blatantly marked as American, or foreign, causing a strong response from the people, a further contrast with the residual and decaying presence of the Chinese.

I would suggest that the different impact the Chinese man and GIs had on the Chinatown community reflects both the power and limitations of the era's nationalist agenda, which sought to find Korea's unique national identity by expunging transnational influences. For the text maps the marginalization of the Chinese population in Chinatown, which is a textual allusion to the way Korean society sought to eradicate

centuries of Chinese cultural influence and political ties in the process of re-defining a *pure* Korea. Both GIs and the Chinese man figure as symbolic influences from which the protagonist can experience, learn, and grow. However, the importance of the Chinese man gradually wanes as the protagonist matures, which transforms the man into a mere lingering, residual presence. With that in mind, the title provokes further reflection on how complete the marginalization of the Chinese influence really was. For the "Chinese" street seemingly signals that this space is spatially and culturally owned by Chinese or Chinese Koreans; however, it is also a space where Chinese people are marginalized while Korean people attempt to build national community. Yet the name of the street remains as another *thing* that calls attention to the Chinese presence, even when Chinese people themselves are pushed to the back of Korean peoples' minds. They linger as a population that Korea cannot erase, despite the Korean government's active measures to reduce the benefits and rights of Chinese immigrants (for whom becoming legally naturalized was made extremely difficult). In that sense, the presence of the street troubles South Korea's claims of both ethnic purity and victimhood, reminding South Korea of its active suppression of the ethnic Chinese population living in South Korea. The management of the Chinese presence shows that, in part, South Korea defined itself through its active containment and ostracism of a group of ethnic subjects. Unlike GIs, a transient foreign presence, the Chinese who immigrated to South Korea had built their lives there over centuries. The text draws attention to the process of defining the Chinese as the national "other" with the strict goal of building an ethnic nation and eradicating imperial Chinese and colonial Japanese influences.

"The Chinese Street" also remaps the modernization of Korea in terms of its transnational character, which runs counter to Park Chung Hee's isolationist propaganda. In the text, the ideologically saturated adults are not receptive to the transnational influences present within Korean modernity. For example, grandmother and mother's attitude toward the GI sex workers shows their inability to accept the changing social structure. Even though it is customary in the neighborhood to rent a room to GI sex workers, the grandmother and mother do not, and refuse to even look at their laundry: "'Scum!' Grandmother would say, turning away from the sight" (214). In this gesture, the two are actively turning their eyes away from the changing structures of morality driven by meager labor options available to women. Furthermore, the Korean economy is in part built on the backs of these groups of people. O subtly critiques the stronghold of national ideology that produces saturated adults who come to conform to the nationalist propaganda, which justified its suppression of an already changed society's various aspects by targeting reunification as its ultimate goal. Also, O lays bare the South Korean government's collusion with the United States in sanctioning supposedly illegal sex work, while pitting these sex workers against other national subjects who are equally affected by modern changes. The ostracism of these women by the conservative moral structure reflects the rigid definition of modern Korea offered by nationalist rhetoric as it sought to erase the conflicts brought forth by wars, foreign invasions, and the sudden entry into modern national independence.

Seen in this light, protagonist's interactions with the Chinese man and the GIs accentuate the vitality of the childhood vision in this text. The protagonist and other children's emotional engagement with foreigners—expressed as fear, curiosity, and

attraction, even to sadness—functions as the sign of an active struggle with the material reality of the era, in lieu of a capitulation to the terms in which the nationalist agenda would have them perceive the world. In that sense, childhood in this text affords a form of being relatively free from nationalist ideologies. This status allows a meaningful relationship with social processes and positions children as being able to respond to social reality in a sentient manner. While the text emphasizes the inescapable pressure of national ideology, since children cannot resist growing up, the fleeting vision of society provided by the narrator nevertheless exposes the violence and rigidity of the era's dictatorial nationalism. The text also yearns for the lively and sensual engagement with the social totality that children are able to experience.

Black Puppies in the Black Market

O opens the possibility of an alternative future by depicting the Chinatown children as capable of eluding state ideology. Although the children's lives are shaped within the state, they are not altogether mired in developmentalism and frustration. This stems from their ability to engage with what is around them, unlike adults who mindlessly produce and reproduce. To put it another way, in the text, adults are insentient even as they act, but children develop consciousness as they participate in their natural and social environment.

In the text, O accentuates how children have stronger affinities to communities that they have forged themselves instead of blood-ties that were given to them. Their shared social standing and everyday activities lead them to share a social consciousness that detests ruling ideologies, namely, ethnic national bonding and production-focused

developmentalism, in contrast to adults who lead mindless automatized lives. O emphasizes the relatively orphan-like status of children. This separate status emphasizes that the children form a distinctive society of their own, distanced from direct institutional or domestic ideological education. The typical family unit of South Korea at this time period was big with multiple generations, a good example of which is the protagonist's family of grandmother, parents, and many children. Nevertheless, it is not the parents who take care of children. Children are responsible for siblings or other children younger than themselves: for example, the protagonist is "supposed to be looking out for [her] little brother" and Ch'i-ok takes care of Jennie, her tenant Maggie's daughter (208). Children care for each other and teach each other by spending most of their time together, roaming around the town.

Children form small societies defined not only by their age but also by their shared socioeconomic activities. Ever since Marx emphasized production in relation to class struggle as the foundation of all other activities, many scholars have foregrounded labor as a major site of subject formation. Likewise, the portrayal of children's productive activities in "The Chinese Street" shows the process of subject formation and ideological operations. The text opens by portraying the daily routine of the Chinatown children during the winter break; it is another typical winter day for them. The major activity for the children is stealing after school. The children steal wheat from flourmills and coal from coal trains. Left to take care of themselves, which includes feeding themselves lunch, the children steal so that they can exchange the stolen items for food. Playing, stealing, and surviving are intertwined in their lives due to the structure of poverty, which initially brought them together to this poorest district of the town.

O inventively imagines the Chinatown children as a distinctive social group that is adept at changing socioeconomic reality in modernizing Korea. She omits the process of exchange but portrays the conversion of stolen coal to food, thereby mystifying the process of exchange but drawing our attention to the children's capacity to fully utilize their social situation despite rapid changes and a dearth of resources. The children's economic activity resembles direct barter: they convert coal to food without money as an intermediary. Initially, this sounds as if children have not left the traditional economy. But upon a closer look, one can see how O presents the children as resilient subjects, who carve out their place in the economy:

> Depending on the day's plunder, noodle soup, wonton, steamed buns filled with red bean jam, or some such thing would be brought to us. And sometimes the coal was exchanged for baked sweet potatoes, picture cards or candy. In any event, we knew that coal was like cash—something we could trade for anything around the pier—and so the children in our neighborhood looked like black puppies throughout the year. (203)

The children actively make do with what they have in their situation. Even though the children are not participating in the official economy, they have a direct role in the black market. The regularity with which the children steal coal opens an unofficial exchange economy of poached products, upon which not only children but also adults rely. Moreover, they are fully aware of the value of coal and its exchangeability. In a more literal translation, "the coal *was exchanged for* baked sweet potatoes, picture cards or candy" would be "the coal *became* baked sweet potatoes, picture cards or candy (석탄은 때로 군고구마, 딱지, 사탕 따위가 되기도 했다)." The phrase captures the

exchangeability of coal as a direct metamorphosis, emphasizing the black market status of coal. The following phrase, "coal was like cash—something we could trade for anything around the pier—(석탄이 선창 주변에서는 무엇과도 바꿀 수 있는 현금과 마찬가지)," reinforces through repetition the children's knowledge of the value of money, their social standing with its limited access to goods, and the value of coal in this economy. Indeed, O repeatedly portrays the post-war push for development in South Korea, where coal is one of the most important raw materials for industrial production. By depicting children's stealing and trading of coal, she posits the children's ability to negotiate their own space in this confused process of modernization.

The children's affinity to the industrial economy is further expressed through their physical resemblance to coal: "[T]he children in our neighborhood looked like black puppies throughout the year" (203). The children's consumption of coal develops into an exterior resemblance to the subustance, indicating how the changing conditions of labor change the children's minds and bodies. The children's intimacy with coal is transforming their body inside (through consumption) and out (through physical resemblance).

Stealing is more than an act of desperation for survival. The children find it pleasurable to steal and exchange coal, and even indulge in little victories. They exchange items that are desired but not immediately necessary, such as "picture cards or candy" and street food (instead of the staple domestic diet of rice and side dishes). Their affinity with coal makes indistinguishable the exchange value of coal from the playfulness with which the children handle it. Also, the way the text depicts the children digesting coal-turned-food suggests how children can physically enjoy and stomach

industrialization. Such a representation highlights how children have a different relationship to labor and survival from adults. The children are fully aware of how to navigate the changing Korean economy from their social standing, and how to make the best out of it. It also indicates that the children's adaptability stems from their free involvement in the socioeconomic sphere, through their engagement with their immediate social environment. This contrasts with the textual portrayal of adults, whose ideological saturation, rather than any sense of freedom or play, drives their labor.

O posits a child-like social life as a new site for consciousness-formation. This is directly linked to the children's ability to live the present. O highlights children's liveliness in everyday activities. The children retain a sense of playfulness as they go about their daily lives and find the present as well as the future meaningful. In contrast, adults are impassive about change, merely repeating the act of rebuilding bombarded houses, reproducing babies, and burning coal. They have deep-seated resignation toward the possibilities for a different future, even as they are engaged in the process of rebuilding the national and individual body. The traumas of the colonial era and the Korean War render their activities lifeless, even though those very activities are ironically their coping mechanism for enduring such hardships.

The children's openness to the present is well illustrated by comparing the their perception of the coal dust versus that of the adults. Children's affinity to coal is noteworthy because coal signals modern industrialization in the text.[6] However, even though coal deeply penetrates both adults and children's everyday lives, adults are indifferent to or antagonistic toward coal. If other adults in the text are impassive about coal, the protagonist's grandmother is a figure who is actively hostile toward it. She

fights various ideologies in the changing socioeconomic situation. For instance, she stands outside of the current national ideology of reproduction, as she chose to leave her husband when she found out that he was having an extra-marital affair only three months after their marriage. She also resists the rapid industrialization that has thoroughly penetrated her life. With indefatigable will, she fights the coal dust from entering her domestic sphere:

> The coal dust carried by the north wind all winter long covered the area like a shadow, and the sun hung faint in the blackened sky, looking more like the moon.
>
> Grandmother used to scoop ash from our stove, apply it to a fistful of straw, and polish the washbasin to a sparkling sheen before doing Father's dress shirts. But even when the shirts were hung to dry deep inside the canopy away from the dusty wind, they had to be rinsed again and again and starched a second time before they could be worn.
>
> "Damned coal dust! What a place to live!" Grandmother would say, clicking her tongue.
>
> A certain reminiscence would invariably follow. I had heard it so often that I would take over for Grandmother: "Let me tell you about the water from Kwangsok Spring. Now this was in the North before the war, you understand. When I used that water, the wash turned out so white it seemed almost blue! Even lye wouldn't get it that white." (203)

Despite the pervasive presence of coal in her life, the grandmother is determined to fight the coal dust. The fruitlessness of her labor shows that the realities of the present, filled as they are with the residue of industrialization, cannot be escaped. It also points to the

irrevocable changes in the present, making the past available only to reminiscence. Grandmother relives the past through a repeated story of a crystal clear spring, because her social reality has so radically changed, as the transformation of nature indicates: "the sun hung faint in the blackened sky, looking more like the moon" (203). In the present, nature itself, "the north wind," sustains such changed state by "cover[ing] the area like a shadow" (203). The grandmother is nonsynchronous with the present—she has not yet accepted the present relations of production nor is she participating in them, and she continues to romanticize an unattainable past. In contrast, children are agile enough to utilize the coal that has displaced previous modes of production, notwithstanding the dust that covers their entire body. They wear the coal dust like their second skin, "look[ing] like black puppies throughout the year" (203).

The ease with which the children accept new changes in the social structure coincides with their similar comfort in transgressing social norms. The children disrupt the state-centric definitions of nation, economy, and labor. Their main daily activity is to poach and steal. That the children steal coal, important raw material for industrial production, suggests that their activities debilitate the official national economy, while Korea is in the process of establishing its newly liberated modern statehood via industrial development. This presents the children as the ones who can envision a different path for Korea, a path not born out of what "ought" to be in terms of the dictatorial ideology, but out of actual social reality. Their synchronous engagement with the present, as well as their ability to see through the ideological haze of the dictatorial regime, allow them the critical eyes to see revolutionary possibilities already latent within the present.

The Structure of Frozen Feeling

Sense experience is the privileged way to register social reality in "The Chinese Street." O posits the ability to grasp ideology as a pre-symbolic ability, which children still retain but adults come to lose. Hence children sense the external world, whereas adults are insensible even as they are involved in social activities. Although sense experience does not automatically grant an understanding of reality, Raymond Williams allows examination of feeling, experience, and consciousness together through his famous yet knotty phrase "structures of feeling." Williams captures in this phrase the possibility of a yet to be realized future that is already within the present. He explains the coexistence of the possible and the present in actively changing the social structure:

> Such changes can be defined as changes in *structures of feeling*. The term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology.' It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. (*Marxism and Literature* 132, emphasis in the original)

Williams discusses "a social experience which is still *in process,*" which therefore contains experiences that might be recognized as individual and isolated, because they are not yet "formalized, classified, and . . . built into institution and formations" (132,

emphasis in the original). He points to the tension between the present and the emergent that confounds "lived and felt" experience of the social process as isolated. Because of the coexistence of "formally held and systematic beliefs" and the "emergent or pre-emergent" in the social structure, the emergent and pre-emergent are hard to grasp even as they "exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action" (132). Hence Williams argues for the necessity of analyzing not yet institutionalized feelings and experiences as they are being formed—that is, before they are fully classified, before a new structure of feeling can be built. In other words, Williams, in speaking of structures of feeling, privileges dynamic and living social processes over mediated and ideological perception. This is necessary, since what is not yet realized already resides within the present, albeit as experiences and feelings rather than institutions and ideas.

Among various implications of his argument, in this section I wish to draw on the possibility of changes in the social structure that can be "lived and felt" (132). Perhaps it is less important to comb through feelings and experiences to tell apart the personal from the possible. That is not only extremely difficult, but also not how Williams understands social change. In "The Welsh Industrial Novel," Williams describes the Welsh structure of feeling that came to drive industrial literary articulations after the failure of the General Strike in 1926. He suggests that it is important to recognize the emergent as it is released in experiences and feelings, for what is personal is not separable from social relations:

> [T]he lives of individuals, however intensely and personally realized, are not just influenced but in certain crucial ways formed by general social relations. Thus

> industrial work, and its characteristic places and communities, are not just a new background: a new "setting" for a story . . . in these working communities it is a trivial fantasy to suppose that these general and pressing conditions are for long or even at all separable from the immediate and the personal . . . [W]ork is pressing and formative, and the most general social relations are directly experienced within the most personal. (221-22)

Williams' formulation demonstrates that what is seen as personal actually traces the period's social relations, hence the need to analyze the personal in order to understand the social. The "most personal" could be the be the bearer of actively living structures of feeling, of a revolutionary future that might be realized. Utilizing his insight, I explore the protagonist's living sense of post-war South Korea in the next part of this chapter. Her sense of the personal and social, captured in her sense experience of Chinatown as "the scent of yellow," provides the perspective that sees through stasis in South Korean modernity. This, I suggest, invites an examination of the parallel structure of developmentalist ideology, which ironically prevented political and democratic maturation in South Korea.

The period's cultural and material uncertainty manifests in a recurring device called "the scent of yellow" (209). The protagonist smells it everywhere, unexpectedly, without understanding its nature or source. Later, the pervasiveness of the sense of yellow makes her see, feel, and even hear yellow. This visual and olfactory sense experience is a multidirectional force that both disorients the protagonist and encapsulates her experience of the town. While some circumstances surrounding the

protagonist change, O flattens these changes under a shared category of experience, the "scent of yellow" (209).

This scent of yellow quickly reorients the protagonist's first day in the town. Even though she felt an initial sense of alienation, after she recognizes the scent she is able to experience the town as "familiar and friendly" (211). However this familiarity stems from the stasis that structures her social life, through which her interpretation of sense experience as well as her existence in the larger sense cannot escape static sameness. Despite the change in her physical location, her sense experiences are organized by social determinants that allow her to only experience this new town through the common post-war condition:

> The city was different from what I had dreamed of in our country village. When I thought of the city we would end up in I thought of the rainbow-colored soap bubbles that I liked to blow from the end of a homemade straw, or I imaged the Christmas trees from strange land that I had dreamed of but never seen . . .
>
> I was lost in confusion. Everything was different from the country village we had just left, but had we really moved? Was this really our new home? It had a dreamlike smell that filled the sky like an evening haze. It was like a once-familiar dream now forgotten, leaving only its sensation. What was that smell? (209)
>
> When the darkness had vanished, the smell I had first noticed began to trickle through the delicate rattan blinds of the night and then rose from everywhere in the streets like a deep breath at last exhaled.

> All at once the smell dispelled my confusion and the neighborhood seemed familiar and friendly. I finally understood the true nature of that smell: it was a languid happiness, an image colored by our refugee life in the village we had left the previous night, the memory of my childhood. (211)

O highlights the dynamic change the protagonist and her family undergo by setting up a cleavage between the country village and the town, and between the imagined town and the actual town. The scent obliterates the protagonist's previous sense experiences and at once redefines the town in a way that is familiar, as the prolongation of her experience of the "village [she] had left the previous night" (211). Despite this, her initial alienation soon fades into self-same familiarity, the stasis and inescapability of the family's social existence.

In the above quoted passage, O emphasizes the fantastic and foreign quality of the child's imagination to accentuate the limited opportunities her situation in the village provides. O illustrates the poverty and frustration of post-war existence, wherein hopes and dreams can only be located elsewhere since the present does not provide the ground for change. Specifically, the protagonist's dream of the new town is rooted in the particular experience she had as a refugee at the country village. The stasis she experienced in the village leads her to project her conception of what is good as that which comes from elsewhere. In contrast to the poverty and hardship of refugee life, which amounts to "a few lousy bundles and some kids" at the end of the day (208), the protagonist imagines the city as a place where she will enjoy the abundance offered by the commodity. The allure of the urban is expressed in terms of the colorfulness, festivity, and fun of playing with soap bubbles or Christmas trees. Her imagination is structured

through the commodified image of foreign things, especially objects that she had limited contact with ("I had dreamed of but never seen" (209)). For instance, soap[7] was a luxury item in post-war Korea: it was first introduced as a war relief supply and only began to be produced and distributed in 1956—an item a poor refugee child might not have had much of a chance to play with.[8] And the Christmas trees, signaling the luxury involved in utilizing nature as a commodifiable household item, were never actually seen despite their strong presence in the protagonist's imagination. Through this, O exposes the extent to which Western capitalism penetrates and structures the imagination of a refugee child.

Grouping the sense experiences of the town and village under the scent of yellow suggests the protagonist's realization that her life in the town will be similar to life in the village. Upon her arrival in the new town, she is immediately disappointed by its shabbiness, describing the scene as "filthy . . . with a disordered vigor" (209), "somehow heroic even in their shabbiness" (210), "the door and all the windows . . . too small and tightly shuttered. I wondered if it was a warehouse – no one could have lived there" (210). The town's meagerness makes it apparent that this new environment will not produce change. Therefore, even though the houses are built in "Western-style," they look "strange and out of place" rather than alluring to the protagonist (210).

Even other children living in Chinatown learn early on that they are locked in structural poverty too. The district the protagonist settles in is known as the poorest district in the town (203). Their impoverishment separates the Chinatown children from children from other parts of the town. This is expressed visually through the Chinatown children's coating of coal dust (due to their stealing coal for food). Institutionally, this division is made apparent when their bodies are subject to separate health inspections at

school after every winter break. Also, their destitute circumstances take away any childlike naiveté, replacing it with their knowledge of childbirth and black market coal trading. This perspective makes them see through the ideological haze, but it also takes away simple hopes that could promise a better future. Instead, the children are incorporated into the national ideology, stripping them of expectations and reducing their bodies to productive and reproductive units. Whereas ideological operations tends to involve seduction and normalization to construct the subject, the post-war Korean condition of stasis manifests even in ideology, which requires individuals to reproduce automatically, without hope, fascination, meaning, or seduction.

As a symbolic, multidirectional and therefore unmoving force, the yellow scent is induced by many different things, including the town, the homeroom teacher's voice, "the sunlight, the faces of passersby, [and] the blustery breeze that crept under [the protagonist's] skirt and made it flutter" (204). The material source of the yellow scent is the Corsican weed,[9] which is the raw material for the development of the cityscape. While the yellow scent encapsulates the experience of frustration and stasis caused by multidirectionality, the Corsican weed that induces such stasis symbolizes development and forward movement. The Corsican weed represents the control and remaking of the individual and national body in post-war Korea. The protagonist describes two major usage of the Corsican weed: it was prepared as a broth to expel parasitic worms, and it was boiled and mixed with plaster to build houses. It other words, the Corsican weed works to redefine the individual and national body as new, healthy, and cleansed of parasites—fully ready to be recreated as a modern body politic.

Moreover, the obsessive use of the Corsican weed evidences a will to erase the previous social destruction and to rebuild the nation anew. This obsession illuminates the impoverishment of the current situation, where people are constantly compelled to rebuild. The protagonist smells the boiling Corsican weed all the time, as people ceaselessly build and rebuild their homes: "[d]iligent as ants, the residents had reclaimed the devastated areas and were rebuilding their houses. Pots of Corsican weed boiled on heaps of coal briquettes in stoves made from oil drums" (205). The comparison to ants implies that the rebuilding is an instinctive behavior for these war-trodden people, who are compulsively trying to control the meager remains of the Korean War. In addition, mixing the Corsican weeds with plaster underscores the impoverishment of the current situation, which cannot be easily changed even with this will to control. Having to resort to mixing in the Corsican weeds, rather than using plaster alone, gestures to the haphazardness of this operation. In other words, the obsessive behavior presents the need to rebuild as simultaneously desperate, urgent, and hopeful.

Just as the Corsican weed symbolizes an ideology of development mired in stuntedness, the cityscape of Incheon[10] itself bears the history of military and cultural aggression in Korea. Through the eyes of the protagonist, O traces the aftermath of the Korean War, historicizing Incheon's physical remains, where:

> The intense bombardment from the warships during the landing operation would long be remembered in the history of warfare, the grownups liked to say. About the only structures to have remained intact were the old frame houses in our neighborhood, which had been seized from the Japanese at the end of the World War II, and the two-story houses on the hill in Chinatown. (222)

The site of destruction exemplifies the successive foreign occupations and the foreign-led destruction of Korea. Nearly everything is destroyed except for the buildings, which function as physical markers of multiple foreign influences and the UN's intervention in the Korean War, the status of which is still being debated: was it a civil war or a proxy war? That is to say that even though Korea had been fractured and in many ways utterly destroyed, ironically, only foreign residue survives the destruction. This portrayal lays bare the precariousness of independence in postcolonial, post-war Korea. However, this "devastated ground" is the very place the Korean people "reclaim" to rebuild their nation (205). O emphasizes that the reclamation is only made possible by the destruction of the country. But she also points to the resilience with which people reclaim and rebuild families, houses, and the nation from ashes.

The scent of yellow disorients the protagonist, suggesting her instinctive refusal of state-led development. Development is commonly associated with forward movement and qualitative improvement; however, the protagonist loses directionality while experiencing the yellow scent, which loss resonates with multidirectional movements toward development in post-war Korea. Various ideas about the road to development clash, and the structures of frustration and frozen feelings yet again conflict with the effort to escape the current condition. This causes a multidirectional tension in the social structure, which interdicts collective movement. In other words, various movements in multiple directions ironically coalesce as immobility, which has a surface resemblance to prevalent frustration. Embedded in this context, the protagonist's bodily disorientation toward state-led endeavors for development suggests her instinctive resistance to the confused developmentalist ideology.

Even though the protagonist cannot clearly point to a single source of the yellow scent, her domestic and institutional regimen causes her to feel yellow and confusion together. This pairing supports my interpretation of the yellow scent as a symbol of her struggle to accept the practices of modernization. One such instance is the protagonist's reaction toward the domestic conditioning of her body. Her grandmother "forces a bowl of [the Corsican weed] broth" on the protagonist to expel worms (211). The protagonist is initially repulsed and then confused: "I would drink it reluctantly, shaking my head in disgust, and then sink into a strange, languid stupor that felt like spring fever. The whole world was yellow, and regardless of the time, I would always ask Grandmother whether it was morning or evening" (211). The bowl of broth reads as a metaphor for the production of the modern body. The protagonist is forced to physically internalize the national ideology in form of a bowl of broth. The broth expels what feeds on her system and thus reclaims her body as an uncontested site that exclusively embodies the national ideology. The effect of this modernizing agent is strong. it completely takes over the protagonist, so that she is too inebriated to tell day from night. This hints at the murkiness caused by the broth, which shakes the protagonist's belief system. Despite the protagonist's aversion to the broth, the grandmother makes the drinking a repeated practice that the protagonist cannot resist. Through repetition, the protagonist comes to internalize national surveillance as inescapable. However, O complicates this domestic education by presenting the protagonist's confusion. The process of internalization disorients and intoxicates the protagonist, rather than smoothly transforming her body. Modernization is presented as a disturbing process instead of a seamless transition that automatically produces a qualitatively improved body.

O highlights modernization not as a private experience, but as one that pervades the society at large. The protagonist experiences yellow confusion all around her: “I wasn’t sure if it was hunger, the santonin we took for the worms, or the smell of boiling Corsican weed, but everything seemed yellow” (204). In this passage, the protagonist questions the national condition of impoverishment and the state-instituted measures to escape that situation, specifically santonin, an anthelminthic distributed by the Korean government via public institutions. She also questions the Corsican weed that is used to build infrastructures and to expel parasites at the domestic level. At the time of the nationwide endeavor to develop and renew, the protagonist notices the institutional and domestic production of modern subjects, and finds such measures questionable.

The protagonist’s acuity of perception stems from her status as a child. O departs from the conception of the child as a tabula rasa who is educated through social experiences. In O’s literary rendition, the figure of the child is not fully subsumed under the national ideology and for that reason is able to sense ideological operations more acutely. The text tracks the infiltration of domestic and institutional ideology into the protagonist, but the process of infiltration is not without challenge. O traces the child protagonist’s repugnance and confusion, and then her acquiescence. In other words, the figure of a child makes visible the institutional education of its citizen subjects and the gradual preparation of the national body and mind in tune with the national ideology of development. Further, O suggests the child as an alternative consciousness, from whose questioning eyes comes a chance for subversion.

In this light, O’s portrayal of the protagonist reveals the process through which the citizen-subject is formed. The multilevel sense experience of yellow provides the

metaphor for her growing instinctive resistance to the national ideology of development, against the gradual preparation of her body and mind in tune with it. The above passage shows that what starts as the "scent" of yellow expands into a holistic experience of the whole world turning yellow as the protagonist undergoes repeated ideological indoctrination.[11] Moreover, the initial sense of yellow as disorientation and confusion changes to "the *familiar* yellow stupor" (211, emphasis added). The experience of yellow becomes familiar, even though the protagonist is conscious of how it overpowers her. With hindsight, the protagonist later remembers yellow as follows: "That yellow smell had been my introduction to this city, the very first understanding I shared with it" (205). The protagonist comes to find in the yellow smell the lexicon that makes intelligible her experience of the town. What begins as a smell becomes a pervasive diffusion of yellowness corresponding to the protagonist's incorporation by ideology.

Conclusion

As the story ends, these children are forced to leave childhood, which might be read as affirming the impossibility of escaping state ideology. However, I argue otherwise. As a child, the protagonist sees through the society's hegemonic control despite domestic and material blockages, and she understands that the basis of social reality cannot be altered by personal preference or belief. O equally makes clear that the protagonist is recounting her childhood perspective and helpless acquiescence to this ideological terrain. Still, through the textual performance, O animates the protagonist's nascent sense of the social totality and communicates this experience to the reader.

I wish to think about this in relation to Raymond Williams' understanding of the unique possibility of artistic expression. He explains in "Literature and Sociology": "Art . . . can succeed in articulating not just the imposed of constitutive social or intellectual system, but at once this and an experience of it, its lived consequence" (25). Williams distinguishes the imposed constitutive system from the experience of it, both of which can be expressed in an aesthetic form. According to him, this aesthetic form can reveal a more complex understanding of the way the imposed constitutive system operates even if this is not what artists consciously intend to communicate. Throughout my analysis in this chapter, I have demonstrated that the text's presentation of the children's contradictory thoughts, feelings, and perspectives shows the revolutionary possibilities that are already contained in the present. Williams' conceptualization of art takes this point further by hinting that whether or not the children believe they can realize such possibilities is less important than that their experiences and expressions locate the emerging possibilities at all. Indeed, "The Chinese Street" suggests that a clearer vision of the future can emerge when reality is grasped in its totality. It only begins when the hope for change actually confronts the present rather than evading it. O demonstrates this with the repeated frustration the children experience, as long as they continue to place their hopes for change at an ideological, temporal, or spatial remove from the present.

With that in mind, I argue that the composition of this text is itself a proof that such revolutionary potential is possible in even the most repressive moment. The vision the text communicates is not limited by the text's immediate setting of the late 1950s; it also encompasses the time the text was composed, the 1970s, as it was originally published in 1979 in South Korea. The fruit of the changes wrought in the immediate

post-war period came to be full-blown in the 1970s, combined with rapid social changes and unrelenting endeavors for political independence and liberal democracy. The end of the military regime came only in 1987 through the 6.10 uprising, long after O's text was published. In other words, the text bears the experience of two authoritarian regimes, filled with unceasing civil uprisings. O saw the student demonstration that successfully overthrew Syngman Rhee's regime in 1960, but she also saw the beginning and the peak of Park Chung Hee's regime—though she did not see the end of it, which arrived later in the year the text was published (1979). During this time, however, rapid industrial development, the changing status of women, worker's rights movements, the violence of successive authoritarian regimes, and movements for democracy continued to cause social unrest. In short, "The Chinese Street" was written when the authoritarian regime seemed to have taken over the country by suppressing opposition. This time period was when the frustration caused by repeated failures at attaining political independence and democracy peaked, and when the exceptional rate of economic growth led to South Korea's being hailed as one of the four Asian tigers—which seemed to affirm the ideological values of the regime. In this context, O takes the reader back to the immediate post-war era to subtly challenge the developmentalism that still driving authoritarian propaganda, and to question how much South Korea did actually develop. Hence I suggest that presenting the children's perspective in the immediate post-war era should be read as a political strategy, one that both complicates the ruling ideology of the time the text was written and reveals the possibility of having an alternative vision even in the most frustrating moment. "The Chinese Street" continuously disrupts unilinear progressive ideals, developmentalism, a monolithic understanding of nationalism, and a

teleological imagination of modernity. While it does not present what the different future should be, it performs what having such vision might be.

[1] I follow Jin-Kyung Lee's translation of the title ("The Chinese Street") rather than the original ("Chinatown"), for the reasons she elaborates: "I have altered Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton's translation of the title, "Chinatown," into "The Chinese Street," as "chinatown " in the context of the United States has a very specific historical connotation" (82).

[2] Syngman Rhee was the first president of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea as well as the first president of South Korea. He amended the constitution several times to hold presidency.

[3] The height of the repressive regimes of Park Chung Hee (1972-1979) and Chun Doo Hwan (1979-1988) were in the 70s and 80s.

[4] Korea has been strategically important for the United States' political and economic interests ever since Korea opened up to the world. The United States' interest in Korea had a significant impact on the post-World War II global order and Korean independence. Amidst the chaos following the sudden independence from Japanese colonialism, Korean exiles and freedom fighters returned and the new people's government in Korea was politically inclined toward communism. However, due to the geopolitical importance of Korea, the Cold War superpowers intervened in the moment of Korea's self-determination. Korea was arbitrarily divided into two occupational zones at the 38th parallel in 1945, and became two opposing states by 1948. The Soviet Union claimed what was north of the 38th parallel, or what has come to be North Korea, while the United States intervened in line with the Cold War policy of containment, militarily occupying Korean territory south of the 38th parallel. As a result, a U.S. military government was built in South Korea in 1945, which then gave way in 1948 to a pro-American regime with the support of the U.S. government, against much resistance by Korean people. The U.S. took the side of the landowner class while suppressing the agrarian class, causing the latter to further embrace communism. The division between the classes and the ensuing tension largely hampered liberal democracy in South Korea.

The U.S. participation in the Korean War is considered as a continuation of Cold War efforts to contain the spread of communism. Ever since Korea was divided into the North and South, both Koreas wanted to unite the country according to their differing ideological positions. With communist China and the Soviet Union reaching out to other Asian nations and wanting the united Korea be under Soviet influence, the U.S. could not afford to lose Korea. With this context in mind, Korean historian Bruce Cummings states the insurmountable influence of the superpowers over the two Koreas: "It was more the case that the Americans and the Soviets arrayed themselves around existing Korean cleavages, nourishing one at the expense of the other, than that Koreans chose sides in American-Soviet conflicts" (Cummings xxiii *Origins*, vol I, 1981). Much recent scholarship challenges Cummings' perspective and gives more agency to Korean people. Nevertheless, U.S. involvement was one of the key factors that ignited the Korean War and American interference continues to haunt the two Koreas, as the Korean War is officially documented as a war between North Korea and the United States due to the presence at the time of U.S. forces in the South.

Moreover, Lisa Lowe complicates U.S. involvement in the Korean War as more than just a Cold War policy—the Korean War helped the U.S. to achieve both economic internationalism and strengthened its political form as a nation-state. In other words, advanced capitalism in the U.S. necessitated market expansion, a stable supply of raw materials, and affordable labor power, which were resolved by American neo-imperial involvement in the Asia-Pacific region by way of "modernization and development," which differs from the previous model of direct colonialism (17). Also the U.S. could exert its political strength, technological advancement, and ideology in Asia, justified by the perceived threat of the Soviet Union and China.

[5] In the original, pregnancy is directly described as "animal-like" or "beastly," instead of the more embracing term "brutish."

[6] Coal was present in Korea for centuries, but the modernized mining system was established during the Korean Empire and grew more rapidly during the colonial era. Japan's involvement in a series of wars demanded a large supply of coal and other minerals, leading to the unprecedented growth of the mining industry in Korea during this time. Even after the Liberation, a constant supply of coal was necessary, as

coal briquette was newly rising as the primary energy source for domestic and industrial use, with its peak in the mid 1980s, followed by a gradual decline.

[7] In the 1950s, soap was a luxury item in South Korea. Soap was first introduced to Korea by French missionary Félix Claire Ridel in 1878. After the Korean War, soap was distributed in Korea as a relief supply, but the quality and quantity were low, and most people could not afford it. In 1956, the Korean company Aekyung produced the first facial soap, Mihyang, in Korea. By 1958, sales of Mihyang averaged 1,000,000 per month in Korea. Such popularity is surprising, considering the Korean population and market size at the time.

[8] Unlike the English translation that places the protagonist as the subject who enjoys playing with bubbles ("the rainbow-colored soap bubbles that *I liked to blow* from the end of a homemade straw"), the original does not indicate the protagonist's involvement with bubbles.

[9] Digenea simplex. Member of red algae.

[10] Incheon was thoroughly destroyed due to the intense aerial and naval bombardment of the city through the Battle of Incheon (September 15, 1950 – September 19, 1950), which overturned the previous success of the North Korean invasion and resulted in a decisive victory for the UN during the Korean War. The Korean War began with North Korean aggression; North Korea quickly took over South Korea all the way down to the Busan perimeter, at the country's southern tip. Seoul, the capital of South Korea, was taken over within the first few days. Incheon was a heavily defended strongpoint for North Korea for two reasons: first, due to its proximity to Seoul, and second, because its port became one of the main supply and communication centers. To stop North Korea from totally taking over South Korea, General Douglas MacArthur led an ambush amphibian operation of Incheon that began with intense aerial and naval bombardment of the city. The success of this operation led to the capture of the Kimpo airport, the largest airfield of Korea, and the capture of Seoul.

[11] The protagonist's exclamation that "everything seemed yellow" might be literally true, given the side effect of santonin (204). Santonin is a dangerous medicine with many known side effects, but till the discovery of an alternative it was commonly used with purgative as anthelminthic. One of the most common side effects of santonin was xanthopsia, or yellow vision. Other side effects include green vision and dizziness, to name a few, and overdose could lead to death. Due to the significance of "yellow" as a literary device in this text, and because the protagonist experiences yellow without direct intake of santonin, I dissent from the reading that posits the protagonist's experience of yellow as solely symptomatic of the side effects of santonin. Instead, O's evocation of santonin underscores the centralization of the modern medical and pharmaceutical system in Korea. Whereas santonin was banned in many European nations as of the 1950s and only two types of santonin medication were produced in the U.S., santonin was frequently used in Korea till around the 1970s. As O illustrates when the Chinatown children are forced to take santonin, the Korean government implemented a centralized system to treat parasites for elementary, middle, and high school students. Students were subject to parasite examination at least twice a year and were given santonin if parasites were found. O emphasizes the Chinatown as the poorest district in Incheon, showing the lack of means to fight not only parasites but also the institutional control of the body. Research shows that over 80 percent of Korean people had parasites as of 18xx. As early as 1933/8/20, *Dong-Ah Daily* introduced the use of santonin for parasites but warns the costliness of it. In Korea, one of the first pharmaceutical companies, 종근당 (established in 1941), succeeded in producing santonin in 1951 for the fist time. There is evidence that the company and three other companies still produced santonin in 1973. Due to the poverty of Korea, an alternative medicine was not produced till a later date.

Chapter 2

Racial Bodies and Racial Things:
The Ideal Neoliberal Subject in Yongsoo Park's *Boy Genius*

In this chapter, I argue that the contemporary racialization of Asian Americans as the model minority entails the willful perceptual confusion of the body and the thing. One of the particularities of the model minority as a racial form is that it is mass-produced and mass-consumed. This racial form, to put it another way, is produced within the larger historical developments of racial capitalism, neoliberalism, consumer culture, and industrialization in the United States. I engage with Korean American writer Yongsoo Park's novel *Boy Genius* (2002) to contend that the structural perception of the Asian American as model minority is akin to the perception of commodities and products, mass-produced for market circulation. Reflecting these perceptual similarities, this text's representation of Asian American people takes on the language of commodification, while the representation of the process of assimilation is similar to that of production.

This novel shows how a neoliberal logic permeates the management of national and racialized bodies. Most of the characters reproduce neoliberal ideology in their cultural, racial, and economic practices. In particular, the protagonist, Boy Genius, willfully chooses to express his identity in conformity to the logic of racial capitalism. He wholeheartedly embraces the making of ideal national-subjects, even though this process couples the commodity and the national body. Boy Genius is produced as a genius in South Korea and then in the United States. His transnational migration makes visible

different ideological investments on his body, as a docile national subject and as a racialized model minority, which work through similar forms of subject-management. The identification of the raced body and the commodity culminates in Boy Genius' self-production, or rather, self-exploitation, as he transforms himself into a desirable national subject by wiping out his previous national and racial identity. This explicit identification between body and commodity is similar to the American national ethos of the self-made man, ironically constructing Boy Genius as the über-American, geared to produce maximum economic profit.

One of the central concerns of the text is the discrepancy between what things look like and what they represent. Paralleling the discrepancy in the use value and exchange value of the commodity, this text is concerned with the slippages that occur in the reading of the body, what the body represents, and what the body produces. It figures in the text through the gap between what Boy Genius looks like (Asian), what his body represents (alien threat or model minority), and what his body produces. The text illuminates such errant perceptions by showing that Boy Genius' desire and efforts to be American paradoxically result in both appropriation and divergence. These slippages continually cause problems in the text, whether Boy Genius is the faithful representation of his body or is removed from it—namely, whether he is a docile domesticated national subject or a rebellious figure who stands outside the national ideology. This illustrates that being a model minority necessitates a certain mode of racial performance which conjoins the seemingly opposed interpretations of the racialized body as both different from normative Americans and enacting the epitome of American values. With that in mind, the text can also be read as a metaphor for the larger representation of Asian

American people and their literature, the vexed problem of anthropological reading, and the questions of aesthetic freedom and political commitment particular to Asian Americans.

Constructing Asian America

The cultural construction of Asians in America has been shifting dynamically with the changing socioeconomic conditions of the United States. It is intimately linked to the relations between the United States and Asia, specifically, Asia's global signification and the strategic importance of Asia to U.S. global expansion. By tracking this link between social and conceptual transformations, literary scholar Colleen Lye argues that East Asia is associated with "a putatively unusual capacity for economic modernity" in the American imaginary, and that this assumption continues to influence the conceptualization of Asia and Asian America (3). The long-lasting association of Asia with economic efficiency, Lye argues, is inseparable from America's dual endeavors of capitalist expansion and self-making as a modern nation.

Similar to Lye, many scholars have examined how the United States' transition to capitalist modernity necessitated the construction of Asia as its other. For instance, Patricia Chu demonstrates that Asians were imagined as lacking the capacity to reach modern subjectivity, in contrast to the conception of British and Americans as fully modern subjects; she tracks the development of modern state governance and the new ways of subject formation expressed in twentieth-century British and American modernism. Her work shows how capitalist expansion conditions the specific racialization of Asian Americans as lagging behind and incapable of reaching full

subjectivity and individuality, but having uncanny economic ability. Indeed, Asian Americans are prominently imagined as simultaneously profit-yielding and profit-threatening forces, as evidenced by the trope of economic productivity evident in racialized representations of Asian Americans, such as the coolie, the yellow peril, and the model minority. With this historical context in mind, I investigate the modern variant of this prevalent economic trope—that is, the construction of Asian Americans as the ideal neoliberal subject. By reading Yongsoo Park's *Boy Genius*, I will argue that the ideal Asian American neoliberal subject is created through the capitalist consumption of Asian American subjectivity, which is made possible by the racialization of Asian Americans as commodified or "thing-like."

The Thing-Like People

Many scholars have shown the process through which Asia came to be conceptualized as America's essentialized other, especially when America defined itself as a modern capitalist nation. Addressing this issue, Rey Chow understands the production of the ethnic and the hierarchical division of labor found in capitalist societies as linked. In her view, ethnicity accrues cultural meaning through the division of labor, meaning that exceeds conventional descriptions of any specific culture: "A laborer becomes ethnicized because she is commodified in specific ways, because she has to pay for her living by performing certain kinds of work, while these kinds of work, despite being generated from within that society, continue to reduce the one who performs them to the position of the outsider, the ethnic" (*Protestant Ethnic* 35). Through this process, the ethnic becomes "a society's way of projecting onto some imaginary outside elements

it deems foreign and inferior," and therefore it is "virtually society's mechanism of marking boundaries by way of labor" (*Protestant Ethnic* 35). Chow explains that the production of the ethnic is determined in relation to the division of labor rather than the specificity of her culture or national origin. In this scheme, racial discrimination is a manifestation of class dynamics and state governance, built into the capitalist structure of society. In other words, Chow's insight suggests the penetration of capital into our perceptions of people, and specifically in compartmentalizing people into the ethnic and the non-ethnic. Thus the ethnic is produced to serve a specific social function, and as a result, she is essential to the society even as she must be constantly ostracized.

Like Chow, many scholars, especially Asian American historians, have explored the particular interplay of racialization and commodification of Asian Americans in the United States. Specifically, the United States' reconfiguration of itself as "ultimately synonymous with the world" from the early nineteenth century to the turn of the century was accompanied by an important shift in its perceptions of Asians in America and U.S.-Asia relations (Bush 76). Christopher Bush elucidates:

> the traditional trope of East Asia as the antipodes of the West assumes a new meaning in the context of the U.S. "opening" of Japan: rather than figuring the *opposite* of the world-spirit, the *pre*historical, the *prehuman*, this Orient becomes the frontier where the fullest progress of Spirit, the fullness of humanity, the now indisputable universality of U.S.-style Liberty at and as the end of history reveals itself. (77)

Unlike the previous conception of Asia as the diametric opposite of the United States, Asia was now perceived as the terrain where American universality could be proven. In

other words, the racialization of Asia transformed from one of absolute difference to one of the assimilable and acceptable, and all for the global re-configuration of the United States.

In this context, where racialization and capitalist expansion go hand-in-hand, the first mass importation of Chinese laborers in the nineteenth century reveals the struggles the United States faced in balancing its idealized image of itself and its management of the new immigrant population which disturbed that image. The presence of Asian bodies in the U.S. made material the contradictions in America's self-making: on the one hand, its universal mission as the subject of history was realized when it finally reached this new frontier called the Orient and even when it was able to import people to the United States as "free" laborers; but on the other hand, the conception of the Asian body as particular resisted American universalism, so the racialization that led to the indenturing of these laborers in a conditions not dissimilar to that of slavery coexisted with the fantasy of universal power and benevolence. Such a contradiction is expressed by numerous state measures that were implemented to manage this new immigrant population, such as immigration laws, court cases, and the Angel Island immigration inspection and detention center; these measures articulate a vision that runs counter to America's self-definition as a universal, democratic nation of immigrants—instead, they expose the United States as "the Gatekeeping Nation," in Erika Lee's phrase.

Despite such resistance, Asian laborers and American penetration to Asia was indispensable in America's transition to capitalist modernity, not only because of their conceptual significance, but also in terms of meeting the U.S.'s economic needs. Chinese workers in the nineteenth century provided stable and cheap labor power necessary for

expanding America's market economy to the global scale. These laborers worked in agriculture, mining, and most famously on the transcontinental railroads, a key infrastructure for capitalist development. As the Chinese laborers buttressed developing industrial capitalism in America, they experienced first-hand how working conditions changed under capitalist development. Yoon Sun Lee explains: "Along with other immigrants, Asian Americans performed a vital role in the process that has been called the deskilling or homogenization of labor—the increasing reliance on mechanized or unskilled labor under conditions designed and controlled by a different level of management" (6). While deskilling enhances efficiency in production, it decreases the value of human capital and increases the replaceability of the workers. The predominance of Chinese laborers in such conditions caused abstracted Asian qualities to be conflated with the abject working and living condition of low-skilled laborers, leading to the ethnicization of labor that Chow observes. Some of the stereotypes in this time period reflect this, depicting Chinese laborers as machine-like (therefore lacking the subjectivity necessary to become fully-fledged American citizens), unskilled (not intelligent or enlightened enough, though Asian Americans may be cunning), and unsanitary (not conducive to the wholesomeness of America). In particular, the metaphor of Asians and Asian Americans as the "Yellow Peril" that widely circulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century captures this sentiment. This metaphor evokes an image of a great mass of Asians continuously intruding and threatening the United States. The sentiment captured in the Yellow Peril, however, reveals more about America's uneasy transition to global capitalism than the actual threat posed by Asian bodies. Yoon Sun Lee explicates the underlying sentiment as follows: "the anxieties about the human, social, and

ecological costs of capitalism" during the time "[w]hen capitalism in the American context began to rely on the importation of Asian labor and development of markets across the Pacific" (6).

Asian Americans have been abstracted and stereotyped at different junctures of American history to assuage its inconsistencies. Robert Lee explains the function of race after tracing the changing understanding of Asian Americans in American imaginary:

> Race is a principal signifier of social differences in America. It is deployed in assigning differential political rights and capital and social privilege, in distinguishing between citizens presumed to have equal rights and privileges and inherently unequal, subordinated subjects. Although race is often camouflaged or rendered invisible, once produced as a category of social difference it is present everywhere . . . Once produced in those discourses, the Oriental becomes a participant in the production and reproduction of those social identities. (7)

As Robert Lee points out, the racialization of the Asian American body as different is significant in maintaining the status quo in American society. At times, Asian Americans are lauded as the proof of America's acceptance and benevolence; at other times, they are chastised as agrarian and backwards, unfit to be incorporated into modern America. Asian Americans are even conceived of as literally embodying modernity, closer to machine than human—incapable of possessing the full range of human emotions, sentiments, and interiority that other Americans share. The repeated emphasis on the ontological difference of Asian America is at the root of various stereotypes, showing the systematic ways Asian Americans have been embedded into the structure of American society. Palumbo-Liu captures this condition succinctly: "[s]uch differences are held in

reserve, able to be activated and deactivated selectively for different purposes" (*Asian/American* 212). These stereotypes reveal such modern American contradictions as the unresolvable conflict between inequality and liberal democratic ideology, which the Asian American presence both reveals and troubles.

Another important shift in the perception of Asian America unfolded in the same context. America's initial encounter with a substantial number of Asian people was dependent on an economic agenda, which bred the association of East Asia with "a putatively unusual capacity for economic modernity"—this association characterizes the interplay of racialization and commodification of Asian Americans and seems to have begun with the importation of Asian labor (Lye 3). However, the fascination with Asian things that ran parallel to the encounter with actual Asian people provides important insight into the subsequent conceptualization of Asian people as racialized commodities.

Historicizing the ethnicization of Asian things in America reveals that the perception of Asian people and the perception of Asian things share commodity fetishism at the root. Asian things, like Asian people, are presumed to have an ontological difference that validates their racialized commodification; this reification then produces a stably volatile imagination of Asian things, which in its turn, I suggest, influences the perception of Asian people in America.

In "The Ethnicity of Things in America's Lacquered Age," Christopher Bush explores the cultural meaning of *japonisme* or *japonaiserie,* a fascination with Japanese objects, and argues that things, not only people, were ethnicized as ontologically different: "In addition to the metonymic relationship of origin, there is what might be called the internal metaphoricity of the thing, the imaginary of its ontological difference"

(85). In particular, this imagined ontological difference of the ethnicized Japanese thing enabled it to function as an anticapitalist commodity, unlike other commodities in America. The Japanese thing was ethnicized as "an anticapitalist commodity with a corresponding imaginary noncapitalist production" that could placate some of the resistance toward the emerging national culture of consumption in America (87). This was possible because the Japanese thing referenced something larger than Japan, a world structurally different from a consumerist society. Japan was imagined as a utopian pre-modern space where cheap aesthetic objects abound, a space thought to be "a salutary alternative, a feudal past and therapeutic future" for the United States (87). Nevertheless, the Japanese thing ironically buttressed American capitalism:

> The Japanese thing was both a transnationally circulating object that helped the United States imagine a form of pure nationalism and a bought-and-sold commodity that facilitated the imagining of an anticommodity . . . Japanese things . . . participated in a symbolic economy of values that combated *and* enhanced the commercial economy they were imagined to protest. (81)

In other words, the Japanese thing became successful in the culture of mass consumption by appealing to antimodernist ideology. Through the act of nostalgic consumption, one could almost assuage the anxieties of navigating a rapidly modernizing American society.

The conception of the Japanese thing generated a number of other contradictory couplings too. The Japanese thing was valued for the artisanal human labor that went into its production, which differentiated it from mechanically mass-produced goods in the capitalist U.S. and therefore earned it the status of an aesthetic object. Such an imagination of Japan's pre-modern tradition endowed the act of consuming and owning

Japanese things with an aura of human interaction, when in fact it was an act of commodity racism, i.e., a market relationship. To put it another way, Japonisme treated things like people, while the imagination of people hinged on the experience of consuming the thing. Furthermore, the aestheticization of the Japanese thing paradoxicallt emphasized the universality of aesthetic criteria while also relying on the ethnically-particular condition of the Japanese thing. This commodification of Japanese things resulted in a specific function for the idea of Japaneseness in the realm of American culture: "By somehow always participating in both the particularity of Japanese national character and the universality of the aesthetic, the Japanese thing resists dissolution in the 'solvent' of cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and yet remains eminently translatable into a 'universal currency,' on the other" (Bush 82). However, such thought was sustained by abstracting the real human labor that goes into production. Unlike Chinese coolie labor, which visibly embodied the harsh realities of industrial capitalism in the United States, the lack of Japanese laboring bodies (until their arrival in the 1890s) allowed American consumers to imagine the site of Japanese labor as a utopia full of artistic creativity but also a copiousness that made Japanese products as cheap and abundant as mass-produced commodities, but without those commodities' distasteful origins in dehumanizing and inauthentic industrial conditions. In sum, the Japanese thing embodied a number of contradictory values including universal and particular; artisanal (labor-intensive, handmade) labor and abstracted free labor; commodity and anticommodity; acceptance and non-acceptance. That is, a paradoxical coexistence of contradictory values had to be maintained in order for the material Japanese thing to circulate as the ideological Japanese thing in the American imaginary.

This racialization of the Japanese thing in the American imaginary during the Gilded Age shares structural similarities with the racialization of Asian American people in the present. Just as the Japanese thing contains contradictory concepts within it, the racialization of Asian Americans operates as an "ostensible deracialization" that structurally resembles the peculiar status of the Japanese thing during the Gilded Age, as Bush explains (91). He clarifies what he means by racialization as ostensible deracialization: "[o]n the one hand, a surface to be overlooked (sure, they look different, but really they're just like 'us'); on the other, a different kind of surface, one that is not to be trusted (they *seem* American, but at their core they're Japanese)" (91). The racialization of Asian Americans, as Bush points out, straddles universalization and the particularization of race, which leads the acceptance of Asian Americans to slide back and forth between full acceptance and limited (or even non-) acceptance.

But more than that, the structural similarity between the ethnicized Asian things and racialization of Asian people reveals that the two are necessarily conflated in the American imaginary. With regard to Asian Americans, the perception of human encounters, the objective relations among things, and the market relations of the current global order are confusingly mingled. This elision exposes a condition wherein the imagination of the ethnicized thing is preferred to the imagination of the ethnicized people. Unlike live bodies, which exceed and disrupt anyone's imagination of them, things are easier to possess via the imagination. This then allows the perception of things to overwhelm the perception of people, so that the perception of people increasingly takes on the characteristics of the perception of things. Examining the well-known opera by W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *The Mikado*, Josephine Lee comments on a similar

situation where "commodity fetishism erases human relations in favor of objects" (*Japan of Pure Invention* 38). Things are willfully favored over people within the structure of racialized commodification.

Bush locates the privileging of objects over the messiness of people within the larger framework of the capitalist condition. He understands the racialization of the thing as "a way of giving form to the dynamics of abstraction and concretion," a materialization of the American racial imaginary within the capitalist condition of reification and abstraction (Bush 86). Bush contends that the reified condition of capital produces a drive for the concrete that complicates the everyday distinction of thing and person. He takes one such example from Moishe Postone's discussion of Nazi Germany, wherein the Jews symbolized all the negative characteristics of capital. People were seen as an instantiation of capital and were thus treated as things. Bush reverses this logic to think about American *japonisme*; in this case, things were treated like people. With this in mind, Bush suggests a non-anthropocentric understanding of racialization:

> Rather than thinking of the ethnic and aesthetic as essentially human traits or values that can be "objectified" and then "commodified," we might imagine a less hierarchized, more multidirectional model in which reification, commodification, aestheticization, and racialization can be understood as historically related modalities of the relationship between abstraction and concretion. (85)

This passage suggests that racialization could be seen as one form of reification. Also, the commodification of racialized people could be seen as the logical manifestation of capitalism. Given that the relations are multidirectional and not necessarily hierarchical,

Bush concludes by remarking that the "commodity . . . can itself be a thoroughly racialized concept" (89).

Bush demonstrates that the cultural logic governing the conflation of the thing and person also governs the production of the ethnic and nonethnic. Bush argues that ethnicization involves constructing the universal subject, who particularizes positional differences that result from labor relations:

> [Ethnicity's] particularity is not something that is or is not amenable to being adapted to the universal, but rather something produced as ethnic by a putative universal . . . Ethnicization in general, then, would have to be understood as the positing of a structure of surface particularity overlaying a universal substance, a relationship that not only applies to person and thing alike but can also govern that distinction. (87)

The hazy distinction of Asian American people and things, then, points to a cultural condition in which non-ethnicized Americans are constructed as universal subjects while ethnicized Asian Americans and things are not quite perceived as discrete. Moreover, the "surface particularity" in the passage is linked with Bush's point about the ostensible deracialization of Asian Americans. Bush explains that this deracialization as racialization of Asian Americans is significant in the production of the universal subject in capitalist society. The ethicized person is perceived as akin to a thing, for it is constructed as lacking subjectivity. This analysis reveals the violence inherent in assimilative universalism: "Such a conception of Asian ethnicity as an acceptable veneer only contingently obscuring an underlying universal humanity would correspond to the problematic role of Asian Americans as 'model minorities' in a putatively colorblind

post-civil rights era United States" (91). Bush directly problematizes the racialization of Asian Americans as superficially particular yet universal subjects, which resembles the assimilative logic of seeing Asian Americans as model minorities. This structure of contradictory and volatile perceptions of Asian American people and things shows the intimacy of total rejection (hostile classic racism, such as the yellow peril) and assimilative universalism (such as the model minority myth) regarding Asian American people.

This link between capitalism and racism has been explored widely. For instance, Rey Chow argues that "ethnicity . . . seems readily to be something else, something akin to a systematic capitalist ethos of objectification and reification, whereby what is proclaimed to be human must also increasingly take on the significance of a commodity, a commodified spectacle" (*Protestant Ethnic* 48). While Chow considers the commodification of the ethnic as a capitalist phenomenon, she also analyzes the specific ways in which Asian American people "take on the significance of a commodity" (*Protestant Ethnic* 48). Furthermore, Jodi Melamed defines capitalism as racial. She argues that the fundamental rule of accumulation in capitalism demands inequality for people, and this inequality is managed by racial distinction: "racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. Most obviously, it does this by displacing the uneven life chances inescapably part of capitalist social relations onto fictions of differing human capacities—historically figured as race" (Melamed, *Represent and Destroy* 2). As these scholars point out, the racialization of Asian Americans as assimilable aliens exposes their vexing status as universalizable yet particular people, a categorization that is ostensibly based on race but in fact stems from the capitalist division of labor. In this

context, “race and ethnicity,” and more currently, “culture,” are some of the categories that circulate to signal essentialized differences. Ranging from biological essentialism to cultural essentialism, these essentialized differences have been the markers that separate the ontological condition of Asian Americans in capitalist society.

With this context in mind, I now turn to the Korean American novel *Boy Genius* by Yongsoo Park (2002) to illustrate how American capitalist expansion conditions the racialization of Asian Americans as assimilable aliens. My analysis will demonstrate that the racialization of Asian Americans involves a conceptual haziness regarding the Asian American body, which is read as both immutably foreign and in need of assimilation. I argue that the text shows how this coerced assimilation works as a means of exploiting Asian American subjects in neoliberal society by creating a constitutive lack in their self-perception through the idealization of whiteness, thereby fueling a persistent desire to have the impossible. At the same time, this desire produces Asian Americans as über-Americans whose presence proves the on-going validity of the American Dream. In contrast to the previous interpretations that identify ontological difference as buttressing America’s capitalist expansion, Asian American ontological difference today reconstitutes America as the land of opportunity, where the promise of equality and a better future for all still holds.

Surreally Real, or Really Surreal

Published in 2002, *Boy Genius* is the first novel of the independent filmmaker and novelist Yongsoo Park. This text was critically recognized when it first appeared,

winning a Notable Title for the 2002 Kiriyama Book Prize and becoming a finalist for the 2003 Asian American Literary Awards.

Stretching the boundary of Asian American literature, the first part of the novel is set in South Korea during President Park Chung Hee's military coup and subsequent deification. The protagonist, Boy Genius, is a famous state-sponsored TV star, who was discovered at age three by President Park's "Great Search for Genius" campaign. Ever since then, Boy Genius has worked hard to promote the legitimacy of the military dictatorship, and he relates to President Park as the father he never had. But once President Park's favor dissolves, Boy Genius instantly loses his fame, friendship, and wealth. Forlorn and destitute, Boy Genius migrates to the United States and spends time plotting against all forms of authority, especially President Park and white-centered American society. He finally starts to consider assimilation at his parents' tearful request, but on the day he signs the Bogota Accords that officially mark his assent, he comes home to find his parents murdered. A vengeful Boy Genius decides to wholeheartedly accept white supremacy, thinking that conforming to those in power will make him powerful enough to avenge his parents' murder. The rest of the story unfolds as Boy Genius struggles to assimilate to a predominantly white-centered American society. He eventually undergoes surgery that makes him look white,[1] but his past continues to chase him even after he completes this procedure, undermining his efforts to lead a peaceful life free from the burdens of the past.

Boy Genius experiments with multiple subgenres of the novel, including surrealist fiction, the picaresque, and autohagiography, to critique both South Korean and American society. Park illuminates the contradictions in both societies by surprising the

reader with a bizarre set of events that parallel real life occurences. Faithful to the generic traits of the picaresque, the text is loosely constructed around a series of episodes instead of developing a single strong plot line. It is filled with impossible coincidences and unexpected twists, made all the more strange due to the surreal quality of the text. But such absurd textual events closely resemble an ethnicized reality, allowing critical engagement with various aspects of contemporary Asian American existence, South Korean military dictatorship, and American imperialism.

Park brings to the reader's consciousness the imperialistic practices of the U.S. by packing the text with often elided or neglected cultural references that relate to American imperialism. Park connects surprising twists and turns in the protagonist Boy Genius' life, from his fame as a state-sponsored TV star in South Korea, the murder of his parents, the surgery that transforms his Asian body to white, and the crossing of the Pacific Ocean in a whale's belly, to the imperialistic interventions of the U.S. in the Asia Pacific, such as the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the No Gun Ri Massacre, and the Hiroshima bombing. The reader might not be familiar with all these historical and cultural events, but the barrage of name-dropping and other references to well-known events continually remind the reader of American imperialism's impact. Even the relatively obscure references hint that the text is tapping into a deeper reality than what readers may recognize, thereby provoking them to question their ignorance and the selectivity of common knowledge.

In a similar way, Park exposes America's guarded structural racism society by portraying an exaggeratedly Eurocentric society in which racist interactions are normalized and the racialized body functions as the reliable indicator of a person's

mindset, character, and ability. In this satiric portrayal, visual readings of the racialized body become the credible criteria for characters' assessments of one another. People are brainwashed by white supremacy and unabashedly show their staunch racism by voicing racist assumptions and epithets. Yet Park attentively balances the textual tone so that the reader can recognize the same racial logic that runs both the novel and non-fictional reality; at the same time, this is exaggerated enough to appear safely distanced from the immediate truth. Anything can happen within the perimeter of the text, including dogs becoming human, Asians turning white, and a dead man coming back to life by taking magical pills. By containing the novelistic space as fantastic and surreal, Park relieves the tension for readers while carefully forcing them to see the extent to which the understanding of race organizes both Korean and American society. Through this balance, Park allows the reader to continue reading, albeit uncomfortably.

Although this novel seems to be safely distanced from the real world, reading *Boy Genius* enables readers to grasp that the logic underlying assimilation may not be too distinct from the imagination of Asian Americans as inassimilable aliens. The two may seem disparate at a glance, since one posits Asian Americans as ontologically different from normative Americans whereas the other posits Asian Americans as capable of becoming such Americans themselves. However, Park illustrates that the two are different sides of the same coin by troubling the racialization of the Asian American body in accordance with the model minority myth.

Boy Genius, the Commodity Par Excellence

By drawing a comparison between the model minority myth and a "genius" in the text, Park provides the insight that the model minority stereotype is a contemporary mode of consuming Asian American subjectivities. The categorization of Asian Americans as a model minority, though seemingly accepting, continues to separate Asian Americans from other Americans as ontologically different—it entails the attribution of certain characteristics supposedly inhering in the essentialized imagination of this group of people. Park troubles this imagination by constructing a "genius" in this text as a figure that shares similar assumptions and functions with the concept of the model minority.

The model minority myth contrasts with the earlier stereotypes of inassimilable aliens, insofar as it acknowledges and recognizes the Asian American presence in the United States in a seemingly positive way. This transformation reflects the changing positions of Asian Americans and the socioeconomic condition of the United States. The rise of the model minority myth coincides with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. By this time, the Asian American population had expanded and diversified: a series of immigration law reforms and American imperialistic interventions in the Asia Pacific, including the Cold War, dramatically increased the number and diversity of Asian immigrants. The social and political status of Asian Americans changed too. Increasing political rallies and activism challenged the dismissal of Asian Americans as inassimilable aliens.

However, the model minority myth shows the uneasy balance between rejection and limited acceptance when it comes to seeing Asian Americans as fully-fledged American citizens. Whereas Asian Americans were perceived as inassimilable outsiders before, as model minorities they occupy a liminal position where difference and

assimilability are intertwined. Unlike the overtly hostile attitudes toward Asian immigrants, such as the Yellow Peril trope of the 1930s, the model minority myth celebrates Asian Americans as the successful minority and as the new beneficiary of the American Dream. However, the terms of difference that presumably account for the success of Asian Americans are simultaneously used to contain that success and to delineate Asian Americans from other Americans. The myth constructs Asian Americans as hard-working and patient, able to overcome the difficulties of adjusting to their adopted homeland, and privy to higher education and socioeconomic success. The myth celebrates Asian Americans on the condition that they comply with the continued power given to whiteness in this society. The myth constructs Asian Americans as the "good" minority, even as the "honorary whites," and therefore, the model for other racial minorities to emulate. Through this, the model minority myth distinguishes Asian Americans from normative Americans once again, and other racial minorities from whites, while sustaining the status quo and managing racial minorities. Also, the myth reaffirms America as the land of opportunity by recontextualizing singled-out Asian qualities in the U.S. and celebrating the success of Asian Americans as the proof of American exceptionalism. Hence Rey Chow contends that the construction of Asian Americans as model minorities is an act of "hailing, disciplining, and rewarding identities constituted by certain forms of labor" (*Protestant Ethnic* viii). She suggests that the causal relation between hard work and material compensation posited by the Protestant ethic in the U.S. has been inherited by Asian Americans. In this way, the positioning of the Asian American as the model minority undergirds the structure of racial hierarchy in the U.S. by hiding real and existing racial structures under an illusion of equality. This

myth situates the social problem outside the structure of political economy while blaming individuals for their inability to escape poverty. Hence Christine So comments on the model minority myth as follows:

> [A] counterpoint to anxieties and rationalizations of economically disenfranchised African Americans and confirmed the continued propagation of the American dream. If one hundred years previously, Asians were deemed "no fit competitor," they now were imagined as hyperfit, predetermined by "Confucist" and other inherent cultural values to achieve economic success. (11)

I wish to focus on this notion of Asian Americans as hyperfit, which I read as a construction of a new American ideal by essentializing Asian culture in line with American values. While this construction of Asian Americans as hyperfit Americans may circulate within the larger American imaginary as both celebratory and derogatory depending on the social context, *Boy Genius* challenges this essentialized and differentiated conceptualization of Asian American ontology.

In *Boy Genius*, a genius is a commodifiable and changeable identity, different from the conventional understanding of a genius as a person born with extraordinary intellectual ability and creativity. By decoupling innate capacity from the definition of a genius, Park challenges similar associations in the conceptualization of Asian Americans as model minorities. He shows that Asian Americans are disciplined as model minorities in American society, rather than born with the innate characteristics of model minorities. Park also shows that this problematic association of nature and ability in the construction of the model minority is what allows for the consumption of Asian American subjectivity.

Park shows how Boy Genius is produced as a genius in South Korea and the United States respectively. Boy Genius is pictured as the incarnation of abstracted relations between the political economy of both nations with both Asians and Asian Americans. Park makes it unclear whether Boy Genius actually has rare intellectual talent or is merely brainwashed to believe that he does. Quite contrary to Boy Genius' primary identification of himself as a genius, he is recognized as such only when he internalizes socially-appropriate desires that further the status quo. The text thus underscores how Boy Genius' identity as a genius is less important than his function as a genius for society. Thus, he is a genius at times and a non-genius at other times, depending on his social use value. In South Korea, his social identity as a genius is forfeited when he loses favor with the dictator Park Chung Hee; in the United States, the perception of Boy Genius as a genius, both by himself and others, is dependent on how much he internalizes white supremacy. Through highlighting how use value is crucial to the definition of a genius, Park allows the reader to see that the idea of genius is socially produced and that it functions similarly to the discipline that constructs Asian Americans as model minorities.

Regardless of Boy Genius' personal belief in his intellectual abilities, a "genius" in this text is a person who has the capacity for supple adaptation to the dominant ideology. This is illustrated by Boy Genius' conversation, at his parents' funeral, with a homeless Vietnam veteran named Abraham. After a period of not being recognized as a genius since his migration to the U.S., Abraham advises Boy Genius to be a genius once again. The dialogue between the two shows the significance of attuning one's thoughts to the dominant social ideology, in this case white supremacy, in order to earn the status of a meaningful member of society:

> "Fine, Boy Genius. Have it your way. Go after Rex. No matter how long it takes. But I ask you this: Will it bring back your parents? Will it change anything? . . . [T]he best thing for you is to stay strong and do what you're best at. I heard that you used to be a genius back where you're from. Who says you can't be a genius again?"
>
> "Who told you that?"
>
> "You've been given a gift, Boy Genius. Don't flush it all away because of this. Man, if I had even a tenth of your brain power, I'd be somebody now and not a joke who's drinking his life away." (Yongsoo Park 115-6)

Abraham describes being a genius as if it is a state of being that is fully achieved with the utilization of one's abilities. If you do not use your gift, you are no longer a genius, even if you were a genius when you used the gift before. So he persuades Boy Genius to be a genius "again," to *decide* to use the gift again, simply by changing his mind. Abraham also emphasizes the social standards that determine how and where this gift matters: "I wondered why we were fighting and dying while rich college kids were back home screwing our sisters and girlfriends. But you know what? I came to realize that it didn't matter" (116). The impossibility of changing the social structure leads to his conclusion to adhere to it unquestioningly in order "to be somebody." According to this logic, you are rewarded socioeconomically only if you are attuned to the status quo and desire what you are told to desire.

Abraham's prescriptive advice symbolizes the logic of utility that Park questions. According to this logic, Boy Genius is conditionally considered a genius only when he is brainwashed by the dominant ideology. It is more important that Boy Genius transform

himself to produce what society demands than that he actually have the abilities and skills to produce such things. His disposition matters more than what is produced; or, to be more precise, the quality of his production is first and foremost determined by his disposition. Boy Genius is given the title "genius" only when he is so fully immersed in the dominant ideology that he actively transforms himself in order to reproduce the very ideology that capitalizes on him.

In this novel, having the right mindset is a fundamental tenet of being a genius. This is similar to the discourse of the Asian American assimilation as model minority, which selectively celebrates qualities that align with white supremacy while suppressing others, in line with the historical disciplining of Asian Americans through the processes of immigration, labor, and marginalization. However, such disciplining is justified through the racialization of Asian Americans as inherently different, yet as potentially able to transform themselves into assimilated model minorities.

In *Boy Genius*, reward and socioeconomic benefit are generated only from the market that constricts and consumes people. In a similar way, the model minority myth perpetuates the current unequal structure of society, while promising a distorted yet privileged status and limited success in the marketplace. This is similar to how Boy Genius is given the title "genius" only when he is fully immersed in the dominant ideology of the society, to the point of actively engineering himself so that he would reproduce the ideology that profits by him.

In this context, it is important that the novel does not make clear whether Boy Genius was really a genius or not. Instead, the text directly compares a genius to a commodity. When Boy Genius meets Lucky Chang, who succeeded him as host of the

TV show, “The Boy Genius Hour” in South Korea, he learns that there were many other Boy Geniuses. Lucky Chang’s explanation leaves ambiguous whether Boy Genius was a real genius or was fooled into believing himself to be one:

> “Who’s this *we* you keep referring to?” I said.
>
> “All the geniuses that Punk Leader Park pimped, of course.”
>
> “What geniuses?”
>
> “There were tons of us. Thousands. Some excelled in music, others in math. Still others were sent as infants by the KCIA to families around the world. It was a systemic and methodical way to destabilize foreign governments and speed up the intelligence-gathering process. All of us, all the children whose lives were forever changed by the regime, looked up to you, Boy Genius. I couldn’t have lived through the changes otherwise.” (Yongsoo Park 193)

According to Lucky Chang, geniuses in South Korea are made and replaced, an image that recalls Marx’s understanding of workers as replaceable cogs in the capitalist machine who lose their humanity by being alienated from their own labor. Like the worker who is found meaningful to the system of production only as long as he can produce profit, children in South Korea are utilized as geniuses and replaced when no significant profit is yielded. They also do not get to comprehend the product of their labor. As were Boy Genius and Lucky Chang, these geniuses are exploited and then replaced.

Park further explores the social construction of geniuses by contrasting Boy Genius with Lucky Chang. Park portrays Boy Genius as a tragic figure who cannot accept that he may not be a real genius, because that would mean that his entire life in South Korea was a lie. This contrasts with Lucky Chang, who is fully aware that his

social identity as a genius was a fabrication. Boy Genius' retort to Lucky Chang illustrates his inability to accept the social construction of geniuses:

> You and I may both have been on TV, but we're not kindred souls. We never were, and we never will be. I'm the real Boy Genius. I'm the one who deserved to stand in front of the cameras with Choco Joe. You were nobody. You were nothing. If His Excellency hadn't turned against me, you'd still be gutting fish in Cheju Island. We're not kindred souls! (Yongsoo Park 201)

Boy Genius cannot accept that he may have been brainwashed into believing that he is a genius. He also refuses to accept that he and Lucky Chang occupy the same position in South Korea, which is why he refuses to bond with Lucky Chang. Park locates the difference of perception between the two characters in their experiences of adaptation as geniuses. Quite unlike the process of assimilation in the United States, which Boy Genius consciously initiated when he saw the need for social recognition, in Korea he was was selected as a genius at the age of three. Because the brainwashing started at such a young age, Boy Genius grew up to see himself as a genius and to see no contradiction in the military dictatorship that he actively propagated on TV. This is radically different from Lucky Chang, who was brought to fill Boy Genius' position when he was much older. In contrast to Boy Genius' gradual assimilation, Lucky Chang had to transform himself to fit his TV persona overnight. Such a sudden and forced change allows Lucky Chang the awareness that he is a fake genius, a toy to spread propaganda for the regime, causing him to scar his own face in order to end his fake life on TV. Boy Genius believes that his status as a genius was wrongfully taken from him, whereas Lucky Chang by contrast expresses a yearning for his pre-genius life, although he knows that he cannot go back:

"Did you know that I never wanted to be on TV? . . . I never asked to be a genius. I never asked for any of it" (189). However, what Lucky Chang had to fake in front of the TV, such as false stuttering or tattooed red cheeks, still remains with him, signaling the extent of his conditioning by this experience.

Till the very end, the text hints that Boy Genius could have been a real prodigy, even though Park also provides many clues that he might only have been the first of the line of fake geniuses. Regardless, what Park underscores is that Boy Genius was made into a genius within South Korean society; contrary to Boy Genius' belief that he is a genius solely due to his individual ability, this was a social construction. In this sense, ironically, Boy Genius can be seen as a genius not in the popular sense but only in the circumscribed terms of the text, for he is so assimilated that he has been robbed of all self-awareness. Boy Genius is saturated by ideology—he not only sees no inconsistencies in the system that names him a genius, but he chooses to accept himself as a genius rather than to find out the truth, for fear of losing his past life's meaning. In a sense, Boy Genius reproduces the injustices of the South Korean dictatorial regime by understanding himself according to the terms prescribed by that regime.

If a genius within the fictional parameters of this text is determined by the potential genius' degree of assimilation and his disposition, Boy Genius can be considered as a genius in both South Korea and the United States. His Korean experience leads him to a similar survival strategy in America. Boy Genius describes his assimilation to the U.S. as a long arduous process that is unlike his experience of being born as a genius in South Korea. Nevertheless, he endorses white supremacy in American society with no reservations, just as he had embraced the dictatorial regime in South Korea. For

instance, he blames economically-challenged people for being lazy; he cannot find fault with the social ideology but instead faults individuals. As such, Park portrays the protagonist as an individual who is always ready to attune himself to the society that exploits him. Accentuated over and over is Boy Genius' versatile willingness to attune his beliefs to his society; he not only familiarizes himself with the logic of the society he belongs to, but accepts it unreservedly, even to the point of becoming utterly brainwashed. His conditioned behavior is excessive and ridiculous, exposing the pressure Boy Genius is under as well as his readiness to offer himself to be made legible by society. This capacity to supplely adapt himself to the demands of whichever society he belongs to makes him a genius in the text.

Park illustrates the consumption of Asian American subjectivity via the model minority stereotype by portraying Boy Genius' self-commodification. In Korea, he was sold on a TV show to spread the ideology of military dictatorship. When he migrates to the U.S., he sells himself as a model minority by pitting himself against other racial minorities and affirming his position as a second-rate citizen. In other words, Boy Genius becomes socially desirable as long as he desires to make himself into a commodity that can be circulated within the given parameters of his society. This strong desire is expressed by his total acceptance of social ideology, by not only desiring to be successful, but by wholeheartedly and unflinchingly accepting the dominant logic of the society. Hence his need for acceptance—expressed by the desire to be sold in the economy, as a TV star, model student, star employee, and attractive male—becomes his mode of existence. It makes the reader see that Boy Genius is so fully immersed in a commodified social logic that his production is only meaningful insofar as he is also able to be

consumed. This reading offers the insight that the racialization of Asian Americans as the new model of capital in contemporary American society entails converting racialized identity into a form of objectifiable identity.

The Split of the Body and Mind

One of the easier markers that signal the essentialized difference of Asian Americans is the body. Even though Asian migration to the United States dates back more than a century, Asian Americans are often read as less than full-fledged Americans. The Asian American body has been racialized to "prove" the unchanging difference of Asian Americans; it is the visible evidence that Asians cannot fully assimilate in America. Thus the visible and physical markers of the body signify a difference not only of appearance but also of character.

In *Boy Genius,* Yongsoo Park shows that the logic of assimilation, despite its garb of acceptance, has rejection built into it, insofar as it intensifies a perceived split between the Asian American body and mind. If Asian American bodies were racialized as immutably foreign, seeing Asian Americans as assimilated suggests that their minds can be separated from their bodies. In other words, the assimilation of Asian Americans posits at once an immutable foreignness of body and the possibility of a mental transformation that would render Asian Americans up for simultaneous rejection and acceptance. Park's engagement with the logic of assimilation shows this dual structure of Asian American racialization. In this logic, the mind that is detached from the body needs to be assimilated in order to be American, even though that assimilation is forever incomplete due to the persistently immutable foreign body.

Park highlights the mercurial imagination of the racialized Asian American through the schoolteacher Ms. Sommers' attitude toward Boy Genius. Her words, intended as consolation, show that she perceives his body as a cover for his self:

> I wish I could tell you that the world was a perfect place, Boy Genius. But it's not . . . And there will always be those narrow-minded few who'll judge you by your appearance and not by the content of your character.[2] But be patient and strong. Someday, science will find a way to correct your appearance. Then, you'll never have to suffer for being born where you were. (Yongsoo Park 106-7)

Park sets up some of the key contradictions of assimilation in this passage, such as the "narrow-minded few" vs. enlightened people like herself; Boy Genius as a person who should understand the "narrow-minded few" vs. Boy Genius as an infantile figure who needs to learn better; science, which brings corrective changes, vs. the natural body, which cannot be changed. Ms. Sommers, "an owlish white" schoolteacher who works closely with Boy Genius (87), draws a clear distinction between his "appearance" and "content of . . . character" (106). Her fatalistic understanding of the world, where people do not change ("there will *always* be those narrow-minded few") and where your birthplace determines who you are, is devastating for Boy Genius, especially because she is the one who requests that he change himself at all costs. But she encourages these changes while simultaneously saying that they are futile because the body is unchanging. The change is considered mandatory but not significant enough to overturn people's reading of the racialized body as unchangeable. In a sense, then, Ms. Sommers blames Boy Genius for his appearance more than she blames those who would ignorantly judge him for it. To her, his appearance needs to be corrected, while people's reading of the

appearance is correct: the only problem for those people is that they are not enlightened enough to see *past* the appearance, beyond the split and extracted body—and that, she suggests, is the natural though unfortunate reading of the body. Her statement highlights the paradox of simultaneity in the reading and dismissal of the body as a superficial cover over the real. Her words reveal her unchanging perception of Boy Genius' body as immutable, although she seems to believe that his mind has assimilated. By her logic, Boy Genius has at best half-succeeded at the goal of assimilation she has set for him.

If the premise of the racialized Asian body is that it is immutable, this supposes a split of the body and mind in order for the logic of assimilation to function. If the body is unchanging, then the mind must be seen as malleable for assimilation to be possible. This leads to the perception of the racialized Asian body as fluctuating back and forth, at times seemingly a mere cover, at others the proof of some essential, unchanging Asianness. In other words, the very idea of Asian American assimilation complicates the conceptualization of the Asian American body and mind: whether the two are separable or not, which is the core and which is the surface, which changes and which does not.

The Stable Desire to Be Split

Boy Genius illustrates that the ephemeral and constantly shifting nature of Asian American racialization, which is inseparable from the building and maintaining of class divisions. The idealization of whiteness defines and sustains white supremacy, racializing Asian American bodies as lacking and perpetually desiring. Walter Benn Michaels' analysis of mimesis in capitalist society furthers this understanding of Asian American

assimilation. He points to the capitalist condition under which one comes to desire to mimic the upper class:

> [A] capitalist economy made it possible for lower-class women to wear nice clothes and for middle-class men to lose their jobs, but more importantly because the logic of capitalism linked the loss of those jobs to a failure of self-representation and linked the desirability of those women to the possibility of mimesis. (*The Shape of the Signifier* 19)

Michaels suggests self-representation in capitalist society entails mimicking the exterior traits of the higher class. The false promise of "equality" in capitalism creates a condition where people believe that there is a chance for them to exceed their current class. Since class difference is a constitutive factor in capitalist society, mimesis and self-representation too are constitutive: the possibility for mimesis sustains the surface equality and abundance, hiding the poverty of the structure that cannot allow equal distribution to all even as it reproduces hierarchized positions. Capitalism is sustained not only by the *possibility* of mimicking the upper class, but also by positing such mimesis as the quintessential signal for *desirability* in capitalist society. The desire to imitate is therefore built into the logic of capitalism.

Moreover, Michaels suggests that self-representation and the possibility of mimesis are not only a superficial cover for real value, but that they have come to determine value itself ("linked the desirability of those women to the possibility of mimesis"). In a sense, mimicking a higher class status has now become the constitutive trait of the lower class, itself further divided by the ability to mimic successfully or not.

Mimesis as self-representation not only hides structural inequality and class differences, but has also come to determine class relations in capitalist society.

This insight opens up the complicated interrelatedness of surface appearance and essence. The distinction between the mimesis and the authentic becomes hazy, at least on the surface, in capitalist society. At the same time, the distinction between superficial self-representation and class constitution becomes greater for members of the middle class, who have the ability to mimic but cannot become members of the upper class. Under this condition, where the middle class is defined by its mimesis of the upper class, surface appearance and essence are difficult to tell apart.

Such imitation, however, is bound to fail for Asian Americans because the racially marked body prevents complete mimesis. In general, mimesis lessens the surface difference between the upper and mimetic middle classes, but the two classes are essentially distinguished by their different relationships to the means of production. The degree to which Asian Americans represent themselves might well signal their degree of assimilation; however, their immutably racialized bodies block seamless mimesis. Despite that, or more precisely, *because* of that, the pressure to mimic white (i.e., non-racially marked) Americans is still strong. Mimesis delineates Americans from non-Americans, and to borrow from Michaels, it becomes a criterion by which desirability and ideal citizenship are judged.

Recalling Benedict Anderson's exposition of the nation as an imagined community, the conceptualization of the nation is produced discursively, through imagining shared affinities. The Asian American body, however, is racialized as a body that necessitates a closer reading of behavior, for it is suspected as potentially not sharing

communal propensities. In other words, the racially marked Asian American body requires a simultaneous reading of and aversion from the body. The reading of the Asian American body, then, posits a different relation to mimesis—the hierarchized class division remains solid for Asian American, due to a surface difference that cannot be fully overcome by mimicking. This split of the surface from the inner essence, which undergirds class behavior in capitalist society, is the condition under which Asian Americans are racialized as simultaneously foreigners and assimilated Americans. The visible difference of the Asian American body and the assimilated behavior trouble our understanding of mimesis in American capitalism where race functions as a structuring principle. Mimesis for Asian Americans, though coerced and desired, more sharply marks the class difference between Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans. This brings us back to Christopher Bush's insight that racialization can be considered as a different modality of reification; the Asian American body increasingly takes on the characteristics of a commodity that differs in its use value, exchange value, and labor value, in that its surface and essence are seen as different. Similar to the commodity that profits the capitalist due to his exploitation of the difference between use and exchange, the assumed difference between surface and essence for Asian Americans produces a more stable, racialized hierarchy in the United States.

Malleable Asian American Mind vs. Unchanging American Perception

Park shows that the overwhelming influence of the racialized Asian American body as foreign vitiates the assimilability of Asian American. Park portrays the assimilated Boy Genius as a totally whitewashed figure, who perceives his own body as

the only remaining hindrance to his full acceptance in America. Boy Genius faithfully mimics socially-approved behaviors, but feels that others continually read his body as foreign:

> No matter how many treaties I signed, how diligently I worked, or how much I yearned to belong to my adopted home and live as a true American, the physical features that I'd inherited from my Third World parents marked me as a foreigner. It mattered little that I paid my taxes, regularly made disparaging comments about lazy inner-city youths, and voted with the silent majority. As long as I looked like a relative of Mao Tse Tung, I would forever be viewed with scorn and suspected of being a communist spy. This indelible truth was brought home every time a random child accosted me in the supermarket and said, waving an extended forefinger at me, "Look, a Chinese!" (Yongsoo Park 127-8)

Park illustrates the intransigent reading of the racialized Asian body as foreign, which simultaneously frustrates and motivates Boy Genius to mimic socially-acceptable behaviors. Earlier, Boy Genius tries to transform his body by peroxiding his hair, using blue contact lenses, and trying to alter the shape of his nose and eyes so that his racially marked body will look anything but Asian: "I also began to loathe my own skin color, the shape of my eyes, and my very being . . . I taped my eyes at night so that the folds would stretch and my eyes would grow larger, making me look more like a Slav or a Swede or even just a dirty wop from the North African island of Sicily, instead of the son of the Orient that I was" (118). The efforts to transform the physical body and bodily behaviors show that the racialized Asian body need not only have an assimilated mindset, but also enact it explicitly in order to earn social acceptance as American. If the desire to mimic is

a characteristically lower-class behavior in capitalism, as Michaels suggests, Park creates Boy Genius as the ideal lower-class subject within white supremacy—Boy Genius has an immutable Asian body but also a wholehearted commitment to a lifestyle befitting white supremacy. In other words, Boy Genius' body makes it clear that he cannot be mistaken for the upper class and cannot be a member of the upper class, even as he enacts behaviors approved by the upper class. In this way he affirms and reproduces white supremacy; while his body signals a clear distinction between himself and whites, he is the prototype of the model minority who knows his place. In that sense, Boy Genius' body is the site in which various desires are concretized: the desire of white supremacy to imagine his Asian body as lacking; his own desire to mimic normative social behaviors so as to escape being seen as a foreigner; a reminder of his inability to be fully accepted; and the possibility for acceptance via his signaling assimilation through bodily behavior.

In the same vein, Park accentuates how the structure of perceiving Asian Americans does not easily change regardless of the changes Asian Americans go through. Park contrasts the vicissitudes Asian Americans experience once they immigrate with the static perception of so many regarding the Asian American body. Stylistically, then, the novel follows a rather formulaic process through which Asian immigrants have to alter their mindset and assimilate. While Asian immigrants may have anti-U.S. sentiments before or soon after migration, they gradually adopt a white supremacist outlook. However, Asian Americans are accepted only conditionally and within certain limitations (the "glass ceiling"). Park's textual exaggeration shows that this boundary, in fact, exacerbates a desire within the Asian American subject to convert.

Park imagines the limits of Asian American assimilation by postulating what would happen in a magically successful surgical race-change. Many characters, including Boy Genius, have this surgery, and it radically changes not only their body but also their quality of life. Through this trope, Park forces the reader to question the basic premise of assimilation: the racialization of Asian Americans as needing to be *similar* to whites, despite the fact that their Asian bodies can never *be* white.

Similar to White, or Not Quite

Park brings out how failure is built into the structure of Asian American assimilation by comparing the race-change surgery and the process of assimilation. He accentuates the process of assimilation as long, arduous, and painful, costing Boy Genius everything from his previous way of life yet yielding only a limited amount of acceptance at best. His entry into society, signified by signing the Bogota Accords that mark his assent to America's rules, strips Boy Genius of what remains of the old world, namely, South Korea. For instance, the day Boy Genius signs the Bogota Accords, he comes home to find his parents killed. His parents—along with the older ways of life they signify, including previous tastes, desires, and belief systems—are suddenly robbed from Boy Genius instantly. By contrast, it takes him ten years to be acknowledged as assimilated. After portraying the parents' funeral, Park jumps ten years to Boy Genius' high school graduation, as if to capture how that time and effort are so often overlooked, whereas the result of assimilation, the fact that he has changed, matters in this society.

On the other hand, the surgery is portrayed as instantaneous and pain-free. Everything related to the surgery is easy, quick, and effortless, unlike the process of

assimilation: Boy Genius happens to learn about the surgery; there is no reservation necessary, despite the surgery's popularity; the procedure takes a very short time; and the change in his body is immediate, with no time wasted for recovery. Also immediate is the post-surgery change in how others perceive Boy Genius. Boy Genius' co-workers sense that he has somehow changed for the better, but they cannot put their finger on how. For instance, this is the interaction between Boy Genius and his boss after the surgery:

> "Did you get a new haircut, Boy Genius?"
>
> "No, sir," I said.
>
> "A new suit?"
>
> "No, sir."
>
> He rubbed his chin and furrowed his brow. "You've started working out then?"
>
> (Yongsoo Park 139)

Park underscores the instantaneously life-changing effect of the surgery, which sharply contrasts to ten arduous years of assimilation. Boy Genius at once receives acceptance and rewards that were unavailable to him prior to the surgery. That Boy Genius attains all that was promised not by hard work and attitude, but by the transformation of his body, challenges the rhetoric of assimilation. Before the surgery, despite his painful assimilation and unquestioning acceptance of white supremacy, Boy Genius was often dismissed as a foreigner. But when his body becomes physiologically white, he is readily accepted no matter what he does or believes. In this novel, minds and body can easily change, as instantly and shallowly through surgery and tragic events.[3] At the same time, the public perception of the Asian American body remains consistent.

By imagining what happens when the Asian body becomes Caucasian, Park reveals the assumed ontological difference upon which the call for assimilation is founded. Park challenges the discourse of assimilation by making visible the absurdity of positing whiteness as the desired ideal for all, despite the impossibility of non-whites becoming white. Moreover, he questions the rigidity of the popular belief that Asians are ontologically different from whites. Through such critique, he illuminates the inequality built into a structure that places the entire burden of acceptance and its accompanying socioeconomic success on the self-exploitation of Asian Americans. The partial acceptance of Asian American strengthens white supremacy rather than dispelling it.

The Compulsion to Split

Through the surgery, Boy Genius' Asian body, or the final remainder of his Asian-ness, is destroyed. With this, Boy Genius seems to have become fully white. However, Park thwarts this idealized Americanization of Boy Genius and interrogates what it means to change himself to become American, asking whether or not this change is possible at all. Many Asian American characters in the text are portrayed as having had an Asian body and a whitened disposition before; with the surgery, Park introduces white-bodied characters who somehow retain Asian dispositions, which they believed themselves to have shed long ago. To put it another way, Boy Genius and other non-white characters still have a split body/mind in America, be it a white body and an Asian mind or an Asian body and a white mind, without the possibility of merging the body/mind as whites can. With this, Park questions the cost entailed by being assimilated as a full-fledged citizen.

The moment Boy Genius seems to attain a seamless merger of body and mind that was not previously possible, his body and mind separate yet again. Now that his appearance has fully changed to read as Caucasian, he finds that desires marked as Asian, which he had worked so hard to erase in his attempt at assimilation, resurface. Until this point, Boy Genius' place in society had been so central to his self-understanding that the distinction between who he was and what he wanted was confused. But when Boy Genius becomes fully Caucasian and society starts to accept him for his new appearance he starts to produce not what he is (white), but what he was (Asian). The same happens with his new-found desire too: Boy Genius starts to produce not what the society makes him produce but what he would like to produce.

Park portrays Boy Genius' repressed inner desires as erupting violently in a way that resembles the Asiatic invasion of the West. If we can imagine assimilation as the infiltration of American ideals into non-American subjects, Park reverses this logic and emphasizes that in Boy Genius' sexual encounters, Asia invades America. Park inverts the frequent trope of sexual encounter as imperialistic intrusion:

> My first conquest was a nameless, faceless daughter of the Midwest who agreed to come home with me after just two drinks . . . I obliged and shot two cups of yellow semen deep into her esophagus. Through it all, she had no clue that she'd just swallowed an army of yellow children, and the blood coursing through the mound of white flesh inside her mouth was that of a yellow cur born of centuries of coolie labor. . . Each woman I defiled was a band-aid for every slight, snub, and indignation I had suffered as a Chinese coolie in America. Each woman I defiled was a trophy for Jesus. (140)

Park's hyperbole reveals the inherently violent power dynamics embedded in the existing imaginary of Asia as a threat to America. The emphasis on the mass of Asian forces ("an army") linked to coolie labor harks back the trope of a horde of coolie workers taking over America. The materialization of the imaginary in such a lurid and juvenile manner effectively captures the violence of the imaginary that circulates in reality. This leads the reader to question what it means to recognize these stereotypes, and further, to believe that they ring true in real life. It demonstrates that the widely-circulating stereotypes about Asia are ludicrous, even though they have real consequences and therefore cannot be brushed aside as childish nonsense.

Even though Boy Genius has finally become "wholly" American, his new picture-perfect life reflects a peaceful surface at odds with his inner problems. Post-surgery, he attains the successful middle-class life he had been dreaming of. He happily marries, buys a house in an affluent white neighborhood, raises a child, and becomes ever more successful at work. Yet his wife, Rosalyn, is also a Korean-turned-white individual formerly named Judy Kim. Though Boy Genius and Rosalyn are now white, they ironically give birth to "[a] little Asian girl" (Yongsoo Park 205). This acts as a reminder that, though the surgery magically changed Boy Genius' exterior to white, inside he remains Asian. In this way, his body/mind split is once again re-established. Before, he was Asian outside and white inside. Now, after a momentary body/mind merger, he is Asian inside and white outside.

Before the complete body/mind merger, the rationale for coerced assimilation was self-betterment, the idea that whiteness would qualitatively improve Boy Genius' life. But the moment that assimilation seems complete, it wreaks havoc in Boy Genius' life

and causes the remnants of his past to come back to haunt him. He thought he had shed all remaining ties to Asia, including his Asian body, but his unresolved history creeps back to him. He runs into Rex after all these years and learns that H-I-J killed Boy Genius' parents, although Boy Genius believed Rex to have been responsible all along. This pushes Boy Genius to unearth the past once again: he neglects his current dream life to pursue his archenemy H-I-J. Along the way, he re-encounters people from the past, such as Lucky Chang (the second Boy Genius), President Park, H-I-J, and Choco Joe. Boy Genius becomes exasperated at his lack of control over the repeated eruption of his personal history into the present: "Just when I thought I'd put my past behind me, His Excellency has resurfaced and reminded me yet again that my life wasn't really my own" (Yongsoo Park 155). Even though he believed that the surgery would make him perfectly white inside and out, it instead causes a severe body/mind split. Park portrays Boy Genius as a tormented individual with the inability to stably integrate his body and mind.

The same goes for the other physically-transformed characters too. Though becoming Caucasian leads them to a lifestyle that they could previously only dream about, such as higher-paying jobs, fame, prestige, and wealth, they all retain remnants of their previous lives. For example, Boy Genius' old friend Rex the dog still has his wild dog reflexes even after becoming a white person through the same race-change surgery; likewise, H-I-J still has the same old scar across his left cheek even after he undergoes the procedure. In this way, the novel reveals not only the impossibility of complete assimilation, but also the different sentiments that the everyday experience of racialization produces. The inability to become fully white is not only a stable measure

that sustains class division, but it generates racial experiences that give birth to a uniquely Asian American subjectivity.

Conclusion: The Ideal Neo-liberal Subjects?

In *Boy Genius*, Yongsoo Park captures how American capitalist expansion constructs Asian Americans as ideal neo-liberal subjects, whose successful incorporation into society as model minorities validates the status quo. His novel also underscores how Asian Americans are disciplined as docile, consumable bodies, who help to sustain the racialized hierarchy of American society. Asian Americans are imagined to fit the terms of economic profit and containment, and also as particularly suited to be disciplined as prototypical capitalist subjects. As model minorities, Asian Americans, similar to the novel's protagonist, are disciplined to reproduce what consumes them. In other words, Asian Americans became the new model population for other racial minorities to follow, and not only for their economic ability—for that is singled out as their essentialized capacity, which, by the same token, others do not possess—but more for their wholehearted complicity with the unequal social structure. The model minority myth prescribes success and failure within a market that ultimately supports racialized hierarchies and ensures social inequality. In other words, Asian Americans are called upon to assimilate and desire whiteness, not because they should and can be white, but because this has become a mode for containing them. This, as I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, is the legacy of the historical conflation of Asian American people with Asian American things: replaceable and un-individuated units to be consumed. I argue that such a conflation attests to a widespread kind of reification that penetrates modern

American modes of thinking about and interacting with other people. Colleen Lye's exploration of the literary and political representations of Asian Americans captures how Asian Americans are more often than not represented in non-human forms like objects and machines, or else they are show to become undefined masses of non-individuated people.[4] Noting how Orientalism, as Edward Said pointed out, works through abstraction, substitution, and reduction, these representations show that Asian Americans are often forcibly considered as something less than full subjects, as object or non-humans, in an ideological process that runs parallel to their systematic embedding in the structure of production.

Nevertheless, Yongsoo Park challenges the rigid racialization of the Asian American body in the American imaginary by presenting a society in which the racial hierarchies, no matter how much they resemble real social structures, are exaggerated. *Boy Genius* envisions a world where the body becomes the sole determining criteria of one's worth. Not what you do and how you think, but your racialized body determines who you are, dictating your function, your worth, and your position in society.[5] Yongsoo Park critically portrays racialized consumerism as an invincible structure, within which the possibility for subversion as much as submission is formed.

Simultaneously, the text imagines the possibility of changing the body as a basic target of social perception. Despite the rigidity of the racialized hierarchy, transcending racial categories is ironically easy due to the surgery. Boy Genius cannot move beyond the given structure when he rebels; it is also not enough for him to comply solely in terms of attuning his actions and desires to the market forces that constrict them. Park exposes these conditions as the terrain upon which Asian American subjectivity is wrestled into

being. When Boy Genius changes both his body and mind according to the demands of the market, a peculiar version of his indelible racial experiences resurfaces. This is different from the stereotype of Asian Americans as straddling between full assimilation and total alienation. Instead, these excesses and traces exceed the given expectations, demands, and imaginations circumscribed by convention. This leads to alternative understandings of an Asian American: not as one who needs to mimic whiteness or one who is altogether Asian, but one whose sentiments and lived experiences allow for alternative engagements with the larger American society.

Similarly, though in a different context, Yongsoo Park contrasts the social structure that seeks to contain Boy Genius and other Asian immigrants with Boy Genius' various responses to it. His responses range from resistance, compliance, and non-engagement to skirting altogether, but it is through this process of struggle that Boy Genius becomes an individual, rather than a commodified subject.

Furthermore, Park presents the unintended effect of assimilation to illustrate how Asian American subjectivity exceeds its prescribed boundaries. Park portrays an extreme compliance with the demands of assimilation as ironically producing an Asian American subjectivity that differs from the prescribed model of subject-construction; by the same token, he shows that people cannot simply be contained in restricted forms. The moment Boy Genius becomes fully white inside and out instead of merely being similar to white, his repressed inner desires erupt. His desires as an Asian American subject are revealed by their re-emerge after years of seeming transformation to have merely been suppressed.

Boy Genius' wish to consume rather than to be consumed is powerful, as if to make up for the the time he has lost in being consumed by dominant social ideologies

prior to his surgery. However, his assimilation and surgery were themselves driven by his internalization of the very dominant ideology that ceaselessly sought to consume him. In that sense, the surgery completes the total consumption of Boy Genius inside and out by that ideology—in other words, Boy Genius' twin desires to consume himself and to be consumed by society have become coterminous. Ironically, through, the transformed Boy Genius exhibits a strong will to consume others, mainly through sexual predation; the idealized white supremacy has created its own threat, the moment it seems to have won its goal.

Such subject-construction can be considered in relation to Nancy Armstrong's reading of nineteenth-century British novels, in which she argues that asocial desires create layered subject.[6] Similar to her understanding of the birth of individuals in British, North American, and French writing, Boy Genius and other dissident Asian Americans become individuals through a series of displacements and divisions against the self. In the text, what desire the Asian American subject has is important, as it shows the process through which model minorities are commodified; but also important is the process through which Boy Genius displaces asocial desires into a socially-appropriate form, and in the end, embraces the self that does not fit in. *Boy Genius* therefore tracks the complex birth of Asian American subjectivity. This happens at the moment Boy Genius seems to have fully erased his Asian/past self, which also is the moment he seems to have become fully white. But not quite so. Boy Genius' Asian American individuality is achieved not because he surmounts the social order or complies with its demands so that his individuality and desire are located wholly in social terms—rather, his strong desire to fit in to a socially-acceptable position divides him, to borrow Armstrong's words, because

the social order and racialization are perpetuated at the expense of his individuality. However, it emerges after a series of contradictions—particularly when he finds himself at odds with a society that cannot map him out except through the economic terms, that cannot conceive of him as a human being capable of full subjectivity. What he should desire so as not to disturb the social order is fundamentally in conflict with his real desire—not because he is incapable, but rather, the text illustrates, because the social order cannot contain what transgresses its boundary in him. This, I suggest, illuminates the larger condition of Asian Americans, whose existence continuously disrupts America's imagination of itself and exceeds the national imaginary.

Asian Americans continue to stake out their daily lives within the intertwined condition of racialization and commodification. The excess that Yongsoo Park and other Asian American writers create allows us to think of Asian American subjectivity not as an identitarian classification but as a critical category of movement and engagement, one that offers a glimpse of the current neoliberal condition as well as its limits.

[1] This text has many parallel to the racialization of African Americans and slavery. This plotline of the text is one of those, in that it resembles George S. Schuyler's *Black No More* (1953).

[2] This phrase is an obvious allusion to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous 1963 speech at the March on Washington, "I Have a Dream": "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

[3] For instance, Boy Genius' heart is instantly changed when he finds that his parents are dead.

[4] For more, please see Colleen Lye's *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945*

[5] This is another parallel to the racialization of African Americans and slavery, in that this logic reflects the structure of slavery.

[6] Please see *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900*

Chapter 3

The Korean Effect:
On Writing and Not Writing as Korean American

In the previous chapter, I illustrated how Asian American people and Asian American things are conflated to the point where the consumption of Asian American things is thought of as a more intimate way to experience Asian America than interaction with Asian American people. In this chapter, I locate the impact of the structure of Asian American objectification in the reading and writing practices of Asian American literature. Within this conflation between thing and person, what are some of the expectations that the reader brings to the reading of Asian American literature? And how do Asian American writers navigate the horizon of racial expectation, to borrow Ming Hyoung Song's phrase? How does Asian American literature, a thing about people, complicate the structure of Asian Americans' objectification?

In her important study, *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction,* Betsy Huang contends that Asian American literature is faced with a particular assumption by the mainstream reading public and literary market, namely, that "works by Asian American writers are *de facto* immigrant narratives, whether or not immigration is the principal subject of the works" (10). This expectation, according to Huang, shapes not only the marketing and consumption of Asian American literature, but also Asian American writers' narrative choices. This chapter addresses some of the aesthetic

demands and racial performances this condition calls for, and examines how Korean American writers engage with this condition in the composition of their works.

In particular, I contextualize the narrative strategy of inserting details that are marked as culturally Korean in Korean American literature within the complex terrain occupied by Asian American writers, readers, and publishing companies. I suggest possible readings of details in Asian American narrative that announce themselves as coming from Asian American culture in relation to the demand for ethnic performance and identitarian reading practices. However, rather than read this narrative act as catering to the reader's appetite for the exotic, I borrow from Min Song's insight that the racial expectations give special vibrancy to Asian American writing.

Tracking the drastic expansion of the Asian American literary scene in the 1990s, Song contends that Asian American authorship cannot be detached from the racial expectations of American society. But instead of seeing the racial expectations as limiting, Song contends that Asian American writers' creative engagement with the given condition creates the particular texture of Asian American literature:

> In their myriad ways, they carefully and creatively wrestle with the specific racial expectations that condition, surround, enable, and possibly choke the lives their works seek to imagine. While they each focus explicitly on individual characters, as individuals these characters are stymied by hopes and dread intimately related to the topic of race that exceed attempts at self-definition, agency, and autonomy. By struggling with such expectations, their works also give texture to the ways in which race both affects and does not affect lived experiences, personal longings, and aspirations for meaningful existence. (30)

In this passage, Song points to the overwhelming racial expectations that the Asian American writer cannot escape, even when he or she is not consciously aware of them. In that sense, various engagements, including non-engagement, are tied to this condition, Song explains. These varied engagements are at times conscious and at other times unconscious; they are sometimes willingly undertaken and at other times just as willfully evaded. But together they collectively generate the contours of what can be called Asian American literature.

With this context in mind, I wish to think about two Asian American texts, Linda Sue Park's *Bee-Bim Bop!* and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker.* Both texts are realist literature, even though *Bee-Bim Bop!* can be sub-categorized as a children's picture book and *Native Speaker* as a spy novel. Betsy Huang suggests that, because of the predominant perception of Asian American literature as *de facto* immigrant fiction, the ethnic writer's work is often judged in terms of content rather than form. This condition calls for a genre analysis, Huang argues, because writing for or against generic conventions in this condition is a performative act that challenges the particular structuring of worldview that the genre produces. Given this insight, why did Park and Lee choose to write in a genre—i.e., realism—that seems to gratify the reader's expectation of the real, the authentic, the autobiographical, the life writing of an immigrant, rather than to challenge that expectation? What does the realist genre provide that, for example, is not allowed by the picaresque of the previous chapter, which constantly thwarts the reader's expectation of the probable and the knowable? Moreover, what insights does genre criticism lend not only to the understanding of aesthetic innovations in Asian American literature, but also to the conception of the nation as a

genre? What can genre tell us about different forms of belonging as a national subject? With these questions in mind, I examine some of the narrative choices both writers make in order to represent the category of the Asian American in their texts, and I explore how this ethnic performance is received by different reading publics.

Too Korean to be real

Linda Sue Park's *Bee-Bim Bop!* (2005) is a popular children's picture book that introduces a Korean dish, bee-bim bop, with bouncy rhymes and colorful illustrations. The text depicts a Korean American family made up of a young girl, her father, mother, grandmother, and a dog, who shop, prepare, and eat this famous dish together. This book has been promoted as a popular book for many American children. On Amazon.com, for instance, there are 78 ratings for this text, out of which 83% rated the text 5 stars.[1] Except for some people complaining about the religious content in the text and some who find the rhyming a bit off, most confess that they and their children love the sing-song rhythm. A first grade teacher writes in her review that this book was perfect for her class session on South Korea; many parents enthusiastically share how their children enjoyed this book so much that they ended up cooking bee-bim bop, following the recipe Park included at the end of the book.

Apart from the rave Amazon.com reviews, the larger critical reception of the text in the U.S. has also been good. Park is a renowned writer, whose novels, poems, and picture books are known for bringing fun storylines and informed Korean cultural detail together. Along with the Newbery Medal-winning novel *A Single Shard* (2002), *Bee-Bim Bop!* is one of her more popular texts, earning both fame and critical acclaim. For

instance, in "Evaluating Cultural Authenticity in Multicultural Picture Books: A Collaborative Analysis for Diversity Education," You-Lee et al. assess *Bee-Bim Bop!* as one of the exemplary texts that "include authentic rather than stereotyped depictions of characters, cultural details, and historical information in both text and illustrations" (338). This assessment is noteworthy, especially since the article is co-authored by multiple library scientists to introduce "the coding scheme" for "selecting authentic books in lieu of choosing any title that features a person of color out of sheer desperation for some semblance of diversity in the collection" (You-Lee et al. 338). You-Lee et al. mention gender roles, grandmother's outdated hairstyle, and the absence of pepper sauce in bee-bim bop as possible drawbacks, but they conclude that this is a recommendable text. *Bee-Bim Bop!*, according to You-Lee et al., is different from other texts that have stereotypical illustrations exaggerating "straight black hair and slanted eyes" (338). This opinion seems to be buttressed also by the text's informed delivery of the subject-matter, as the authors comment on how the recipe for bee-bim bop is accurate ("the overall description of the process of making Bee-bim bop is correct" [338]).

However, this text has had a quite different reception by some Korean communities in the United States. In missycoupons.com, one of the Korean-language based Internet communities targeting married Korean women living in America, *Bee-Bim Bop!* is not seen in such a favorable light. This website is comprised mostly of married Korean women who are temporarily living in the United States for post-graduate education or work or who have come to settle in the United States permanently. It began as a place to share information about discount sale deals, but it evolved to encompass various aspects of life in the United States for overseas Koreans, from offering English

language lessons and legal counsel to sharing information about such topics as child-rearing in the American cultural and educational system, adapted Korean recipes and easy American recipes, and various tutorials (including knitting, painting, etc.). The conversation on *Bee-Bim Bop!* started with a posting from someone who purchased the book to read for the story time at her child's school. She writes that she was initially thrilled to find this book on Amazon, thinking that it would be a fun and gentle way of introducing Korean culture to children. However, she decided not to read this book for the story time. With her lead began a discussion about aspects of *Bee-Bim Bop!* that overseas Koreans found troubling. It turns out that many of the visitors to this website had already read or at least heard of *Bee-Bim Bop!*, for it is one of the very few children's books in English with a Korean cultural background. Despite great recommendations, many of this website's visitors found the text's representation of the Korean or Korean American family problematic, particularly for its outdated and narrow representation of Korean culture. Specifically, people judged the cultural details in the illustrations misleading, even though they thought the sing-song rhymes were fun. For instance, many found the grandmother's hanbok (Korean traditional dress) and hairstyle so outdated that one commenter said she was reminded of her great-grandmother. Some criticized the traditional kite hanging on the kitchen wall as absurd, commenting that they never saw any Korean house using a kite as a wall decoration. Some stated that the gender roles portrayed in the book were problematic. The way the mother shops and prepares everything with the help of her young daughter, while grandmother and father come to the table only when everything is ready, upset many in this discussion. Some people commented on the book's religious generalizations, e.g., the family's habit of saying

grace before meals. At the root of each comment was a critique of how this text, one of the few that depict a Korean American family and Korean traditional food, promotes a reductive and even at times faulty illustration of Korean and Korean American culture. People found it troubling that a non-Korean American readership might think that this text's portrayal of Korean gender and family dynamics, clothing, and decoration is the authentic portrait of Korean and Korean American culture.

These different readings of *Bee-Bim Bop!* bring to light how different national and aesthetic allegiances generate different reading experiences of a cultural text. You-Lee et al. in "Evaluating Cultural Authenticity in Multicultural Picture Books: A Collaborative Analysis for Diversity Education" and the commenters on missycoupons.com both approach *Bee-Bim Bop!* with a shared attention to the representation of a cultural minority, but their responses differ greatly. Korean discussants pick up on the essentialized understanding of Korea is apparent in the book's depiction of objects and inter-family dynamics, giving the impression that South Korea and Korean America are not yet modernized or civilized. On the one hand, this criticism points to a history of understanding Korea as in need of American rescue that began with the Korean War and that continues to reverberate in American cultural media, from such TV series as *M.A.S.H*. (1972-1983) and *Lost* (2004-2010) to the film, *The Interview* (2014). In that sense, this response is consistent with the critique of Orientalism, wherein a reductive set of represented images or ideas stand in for the everyday reality of non-Western societies, thus granting structural superiority to a West imagined as alone fully possessed of complexity and subjectivity. On the other hand, the response also reveals the anxieties of Koreans living in the United States, who tend to exhibit a heightened sense of

nationalism and national/cultural representativeness due to their experience of living as a foreigner. These anxieties tend to find expression in ambivalent ways, usually through either severe criticism of the home culture or else strict adherence to what they identify as that culture—and often these contradictory impulses are mingled together. Those who criticized Park's book are sensitive to minute details and to how its represented images might come to impact the understanding of Korea in the American national imaginary, since everyday life for these commenters is filled with the disorientation of living in an unfamiliar society and the experience of standing out as awkward or foreign. The self-consciousness caused by their position as foreigners in America and their heightened identification as Koreans also increases their sense that they represent their own and other Korean people's practices.

In contrast, You-Lee et al. have the expertise to pick up on the same cultural details that Korean discussants of *Be-Bim Bop!* notice, but these details are not enough to overturn their favorable reading of the text because they judge that *Bee-Bim Bop!* avoids stereotypical racializations of Asian American bodies or culture. There is a long history of Asian Americans' racialization through the highlighting of certain physical markers and the reading of visually-coded racial difference as signaling differences of character.[2] These visual cues become the basis for stigmatizing Asian Americans as aliens who should not be welcomed, reinforcing the contradictions that arise in the process of modernization in the United States, such as the perceived threat of Asian labor power (the coolie, the Yellow Peril) or Asian encroachment on idealized American family values (the Dragon Lady, deviant Asian men).[3] Considering such historical background, the illustrations in *Bee-Bim Bop!* do not conform to the stereotypical visualization of racial

differences, such as "straight black hair and slanted eyes" (You-Lee et al. 338), allowing Asian American scholars to find it more culturally authentic.

The difference between these responses reveals the embedded historical contexts and institutional structures that various readerships bring to the reading of the Asian American text. It calls for an examination of how cultural details function differently for different readers, including Asians, Asian Americans, and non-Asian Americans—as well as how the Asian American text has come to bear certain expectations as an ethnically marked text in the United States. In short, the set of historical dynamics that undergird different receptions of the text need to be examined.

The original missycoupons.com poster's rather astute concluding remark offers a point of entry for these examinations:

> Just as the outdated grandmother's hanbok illustrates, this book seems to be written with an intention that this book should cry out Korea, the illustration drawn with the mandate that everything looks Korean. . . . I have never seen a kite as a wall decoration. The text tries too hard to be Korean, and in the process rather ended up losing its Korean-ness.[4]

Up to this point, the poster has listed why the representation is faulty on various levels: it is outdated (hanbok, hair style); it features items used in a wrong context (kite); it features selective or stereotypical renditions of Korean cultural and familial practices (prayer, gender dynamics). Her concluding words, however, reveal more than an objection to inaccuracies. She critiques the practice of representing Korea with certain objects that are more heavily vested with the symbolic power of Korean-ness than others. Implicit in her evaluation are two frequent practices found in Asian American literature:

first, the circulation of a limited number of better-known objects and cultural traits, such as hanbok and supposedly Confucian gender dynamics, over others; second, the utilization of culturally-marked objects that would stand out as non-American and therefore Korean, such as the hairpin and the kite, even though it is frequently out of context, inaccurate, and overly conspicuous. While these practices are meant to connote the larger ethnic culture and add veracity to the representation, the poster concludes that these practices lead to the loss of "Korean-ness" instead.

The evocation of this slippery category called "Korean-ness" points to the slippage among Korean objects, ways of representing Korea, and represented "Korean-ness." While the incommensurability of the representation and the represented is a frequently discussed issue in literary studies, this category allows an examination of the ways in which ethnic authenticity is established in Asian American literary representation, which engages the reader's *expectations* of the ethnic culture. With that in mind, different responses to *Bee-Bim Bop!* allow exploration of some of the categories pertaining to Asian American literature, including representation, representativeness, and authenticity. In particular, the long history of Asian Americans' alienation, as well as the reading of Asian American literature through an Orientalized view of Asian culture defined by a mediated contact with objects that has come to take precedence over actual contact with people, are significant in creating a condition of cultural expectation, aesthetic creativity, and political challenge for Asian American writers.

My particular interest in this chapter lies in the utilization of culturally-marked objects, details, and practices referring to Asian and Asian American culture that have come to be strongly associated with the representation of Asian America in the American

imaginary. What makes these details attractive, repulsive, or handy for people to readily associate with Asian or Asian American culture? What makes Asian American writers rely on or challenge the use of such culturally-marked details, and what does it mean that they engage with them? These questions lead to an examination of the significance of culturally-marked objects, details, and glosses about Asian American culture as found in *Bee-Bim Bop!* as one of the characteristic representational practices in Asian American literature. For instance, while *Bee-Bim Bop!* is careful to engage the reader's sensitivity to cultural knowledge through its subject matter (the preparation and eating of bee-bim bop) and its subtle incorporation of Korean cultural traits, the ways in which the text achieves this through the utilization of culturally-marked illustrations of the background point to the complex terrain upon which Asian American writers, readers, and publishing companies communicate. In this chapter, then, I track the details and glosses of Korean culture in a number of Korean American literary works to explore the particular racial management of Asian Americans and the countervailing force of Korean American literary responses. The frequent yoking of certain representative objects to Asian culture, I argue, is in line with a larger commodity culture that also shapes the racialization of Asian American people and literature. In the following pages, I will track how neoliberal logic solicits certain mode of writing and reading, and how Korean American writers creatively engage with that context.

Native Speaker *and the Native Writer*

Published in 1995, in the middle of a decade that saw an increased production of Asian American literature, Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* marks a unique success in

that literature's rapidly developing canon. It was met with wide acclaim, winning various awards, including the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the Quarterly Paperback Book Club's New Voice Award, and the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, to name a few. It also is the first Korean American fiction to be published by a major publisher—Riverhead, a division of GP Putnam and Sons. *Native Speaker* exemplifies the unprecedented growth of Asian American texts in the 1990s.

Native Speaker is preoccupied with exploring Asian American existence in the 1990s, during a demographic shift in the Asian American presence, itself accompanied by significant social changes. Lee portrays the anxieties of being Korean American in that decade, when stereotypes of Asian Americans traversed the spectrum from inscrutable aliens and model minority. The conflicts and anxieties of being Korean American in this era are captured through the characterization of the protagonist and his difficulty in forming a meaningful relationship with himself and others, including his father figures and his wife.

The protagonist is Henry Park, a second-generation Korean immigrant who walks the reader through the text with his careful first-person narration. Henry is unsure of himself, of others, and of the society he is in, always wary in his actions and mindful of how others see him. He is a keen observer of the people around him; thus, much of his action is derived from his assessment of what others expect of him. However, the novel opens with his white wife, Lelia, leaving him, and through the course of the novel his strained relationship with people unfolds. Henry finds comfort from his job as a spy, since it does not require him to commit to a fixed identity but allows him to change his persona as his task requires.

We find these characteristics mirrored in a narrative style marked by unreliability. Chang-rae Lee crafted Henry as a person who does not come to terms with himself—due to Henry's urge to blend in, he has been mimicking others for his entire life and is uncertain about who he is. Henry's narration is full of understatements and insincerities mixed in with strong and beautiful prose, as if he cannot be frank even with himself, not to mention others. His narrative voice is scrupulously constructed, each word and detail carefully weighed and restrained. But despite this appearance of instability, Henry's strong control over what he tells is apparent. He is obsessed with the English language; not only does he wish to be seen as a native speaker, but her moreover desires the security and authority that he imagines having a single native language will bring him. His narrative is suffused with these preoccupations. Such mastery and control over language is tightly bound with his assimilation to American society. Sometimes lyrical and at other times terse, his language shows the flexibility of a person who has lived his whole life based on observing and copying others, which grants him multiple voices and personae.

Considering the tone of the narration, the scene at the Korean restaurant stands out. This short chapter takes place at "a new Korean barbecue house" where Henry and Kwang go for dinner (Chang-rae Lee 180). What is striking about this chapter is that it is filled with details of and glosses on Korean culture. Henry becomes a cultural ambassador, as if he expects his reader to lack knowledge that he is obligated to provide. If he has been reading what other characters in the text have been expecting of him, this time, Henry forestalls the reader's ignorance of Korean culture.

The chapter opens with Henry's description of the Korean barbecue restaurant. The reader learns only after finishing the first paragraph that the entire depiction of the restaurant is not synchronous with Henry and Kwang's experience. Henry is not talking about his current observations or his reminiscences. He is rather giving an exegesis of what to expect from Korean barbecue restaurants in general:

> The Korean restaurant had two floors. The main floor was for casual diners, lone businessmen and couples and families. The upstairs was reserved for quieter meals and private parties. The tables were all large enough for a small metal hollow to be fitted in their centers. When you order kalbi or bulgogi, a man brings a tin of red-hot coals to set inside the pit of the table. He then places over it a cast-iron grill. The waitress brings a platter of the marinated meat and starts cooking it. She leaves and then comes back with a huge tray of side plates, prepared vegetables and shellfish and seaweed and four or five kinds of kimchee . . . She brings more plates, none larger than a hand, and soon the table is completely covered. There must be almost twenty plates. The Korean table is a lesson in plates. You finish the grilling yourself, the way you like it, and then wrap the sweetened meat with rice and paste in leaf lettuce, and eat quickly with your hands.
>
> The hostess appeared from the coat room and greeted us with bows. She took our coats. John Kwang walked a few steps with her and said something I couldn't hear, but she nodded and then led us to an upstairs room. (Chang-rae Lee 189)

Henry is explaining the culture of Korean barbeque to the reader. This is striking because this scene marks the reader as one who is not too familiar with Korean culture and marks Henry as a connoisseur who shares his expertise—based less on personal experience than on a knowledge of Korean culture in general. In other instances, Henry's observations quickly make him probe himself and usually lead him to his past memories. But in this scene and other scattered instances where Henry muses on Korea-related subjects, Henry starts to explain Korean culture for the reader.

Furthermore, the somewhat long description that opens the chapter is not there to establish what consuming that specific Korean food would signify in the larger narrative structure. Henry and Kwang order "*soju*, clear liquor made from potatoes" and "*gochoo pajun* (hot pepper and scallion fritters)" instead of the food described in the passage (Chang-rae Lee 190). The cultural details in the quoted passage do not help to prepare for the ingestion of a Korean cultural value system symbolized by the Korean food described, or to aid in understanding the communal performance of cooking and eating this food. Instead, the cultural details form the background of the narration. This scene is another excellent example of the insertion of cultural details in the narration that I wish to explore. Similar to the background illustrations in *Bee-Bim Bop!*, the provided details are not significant information for the plotline, nor does their presentation necessarily conform to the rest of the narrative style. However, the details establish that a larger sense of Korean culture undergirds the text. These details, I argue, have significant function in validating the authenticity of the cultural representation. Cultural details, non-English phrases, and short glosses on Korean culture, just like the background

illustrations of Korean objects in *Bee-Bim Bop!,* corroborate the cultural authenticity of the text.

The function of background details within narrative has been examined by Roland Barthes in "The Reality Effect." Barthes explains "useless details," or the extraneous descriptions that appear to serve no function within the narrative structure, in relation to a transformation in the mode of representation in his time (51). Traditionally, only the denotative level of signification was recognized, in which details that do not seem to signify anything meaningful in terms of the content of the narrative would be regarded as "useless." However, Barthes introduces another level of signification, in which such seemingly "useless details" that do not participate in the signification of the content are employed to establish verisimilitude, connoting "the category of the real (and not its contingent contents)" (53). Barthes calls this "the reality effect." While Barthes discusses the reality effect in regards to the nineteenth-century French realist novel and historical narrative, known for their copious details, I would like to extend the discussion to Asian American literature. Similar to Barthes' logic, I argue that the details marked as Asian (or Asian American) in Asian American literature signify not only the immediate objects being represented, but also signals the larger category of "Asian America" or "Asian American culture," which is supposed to be underlying the narrative. These details establish the Asian Americanness of the work, that its representation is true-to-life. In other words, Asian Americanness is not demonstrated through the plotline alone, but the culturally marked details, short phrases, and words together create a generalized atmosphere of Asian American culture that surrounds the text's events.

Though seemingly extraneous to the major plotline, the details enhance the plausibility of the work as Asian American literature, and help create the work's overall mood. That such culturally-marked details are short, fleeting, and do not seem to draw direct attention to themselves is important. They are salient enough to demonstrate that a larger Asian and Asian American culture forms the textual world, but not intimidating to unaccustomed eyes. These are usually marked with italics or accompanied by a brief explanation, signaling their anticipated unfamiliarity to the reader. Italics and explanations are the sanction for the reader to attribute such unfamiliarity to the foreignness of the detail, instead of their own lack of knowledge. They offer space for the reader to recognize and explore them as something from outside, but also as safe enough to consume because they also signal the multicultural possibility of a modern America that contains a wealth of unfamiliar cultures within itself. Moreover, the unfamiliar allows the reader to trust the writer's expertise on the ethnic culture underwriting the text, and moreover helps the reader to trust that what is unrecognizable is authentically ethnic by building on the existing knowledge of what is familiarly ethnic.

This viewpoint provides a way of thinking about why only a relatively small number of such culturally-marked objects and tropes circulates in Asian American literature. These objects function as stable markers of Asianness, seemingly withstanding the vicissitudes of lived reality. This is not due to poverty of imagination or to a shortage of cultural objects forming Asian Americans' material reality. Instead, I suggest that it points to the condition that a certain degree of Asianness is acceptable to the non-Asian American, and that what is excessively Asian is incongruous with what is American.

This could offer one explanation for many familiar and now almost trite tropes in *Native Speaker*: a reticent father and rebellious son, an obedient and quiet mother, Korean immigrants who work in grocery and dry cleaning, their strong desire for upward mobility, their troubled relationship to language and identity, their return to blood origins, and so on and so forth. Inserted Korean phrases are mostly food-related—better-known ones, such as *kimchee*, *bulgogi,* and *kalbi*, which once again affirms the status of food as an easy point of accessing other cultures. The cultural phrases reveal the interworking of the muted saliency, recognizability, and tamed unfamiliarity of such details as are necessary to produce the reality effect in Asian American literature. In that sense, this specific mode through which the Asian effect is produced allows us to see the site of contention, that is, the site of racial management and the constitution of white as the ideal American subject, where signs of Asian Americanness need to be subdued. And we can also see the aesthetic choices required of Asian American writers, whose lived situation cannot be explained without the incorporation of what might seem outlandish or exotic.

This mandating of the domesticated exotic, however, does not mean that the intended reader is necessarily someone unfamiliar with Asian American culture alone. Rather, as Min Song explains, it is related to the logic that guides American media and narrative representation of Asians and Asian Americans at large: unless Asian and Asian American characters are somehow connected with "characters that [consumers] are already habituated to care about – namely, white characters," it is extremely difficult to interest consumers (82). The larger American readership is not expected to be familiar with Asian and Asian American culture, as opposed to the white characters whom readers are "habituated to care about" (82). Song explains that Asian American writers'

awareness of this logic shapes the tendency in Asian American fiction of marginalizing Asian American characters while foregrounding ethnicities other than Asian American, especially white.[5] After all, it is naïve to think that Asian American writers can write freely without taking into consideration the condition of American book market, where they cannot ignore marketability and accessibility if they want to have their works published. However, this tendency does not mean that the writers internalize the fear that unless you play safe (that is, have white characters) the reader will not be able to emotionally connect with the characters. Song links this to another prevalent expectation for Asian American writers, that is, to write about their own ethnicity, if not about generalizable white experience. Song suggests that the heightened awareness of these two logics challenge Asian American writers to think and engage race in more complex ways, which collectively allow a bigger scope for thinking about differences: "all of these writers are actively seeking alternative ways of thinking about difference and hence about race. . . . By refusing to be ethnic or even interethnic, these works clear space to talk more directly about race" (84). Song contends that the compromises and negotiations that Asian American writers cannot but juggle generate a perspective to think unconventionally or radically about difference and, race.

Similar to Song, I suggest that the inclusion of culturally-marked objects in Asian American narrative is the result of Asian American writers' struggle with their positioning in the national book market and the larger American imaginary. The culturally-marked details can be seen as the distillation of Asian American writers' anxieties, compromises, creativity, and particularity. I propose that the narrative utilization of cultural details instantiates the precarious position of Asian American

writers, who are speaking to both a white and a non-white reading public used to reading books with white characters. This also means that Asian American writers have to negotiate different levels of knowledge and points of identification for different reading audiences, as illustrated by the distinct receptions of *Bee-Bim Bop!*.

With that in mind, I now turn to the history of racialization of Asian American texts to map the condition of composition for Asian American writers. In particular, I pay attention to how racialized things have come to be the most effective as well as the easiest markers of Asianness, leading Asian American writers to work with racialized things in their narrative. Through this, I seek to show the intertwined development of how racialized *things* have come to be the readiest signs of Asian culture and how Asian American culture itself has been commodified in the United States.

The Social Life of Asian American Things

The particular process through which Asian culture has been commodified in the American imaginary is linked to the ways in which racialized things are easily perceived as synecdoches of the larger Asian culture. This mode of cognition, I suggest, makes it possible for culturally-marked objects in Asian American texts to signal the wealth of Asian culture underpinning such narrative detail.

The stronghold of the Asian thing in the American imaginary has a long historical context. In her essay "American Decorative Orientalism from the 19th into the 20th Century," Josephine Lee shows how the racialization of Asian things, consumptive practices, and racial performances is correlated in American culture. Lee analyzes the immense popularity of imported or imitative Asian domestic objects in late-nineteenth-

and twentieth-century American households. With the intensification of consumer capitalism in this time period, domestic space and consumption came to overlap. This led the domestic space to be re-defined as a place where consumptive practices would be made visible. What Lee calls "decorative orientalism" captures the intimate pervasion of feminized and decorative Oriental things into American domestic sphere. Lee emphasizes the fixation on *things* that sustained the fantasy of Asia. Unlike live people, who challenged and interrupted the structure of fantasy, the Orient was easily instantiated by waving a fan or wearing a kimono.

The consumption of things became one of the preferred methods of experiencing Asian culture. America favored Asian things over Asian people, for the messiness of real life human encounters, in the case of Asian Americans, has continuously disrupted America's image of itself as a land of freedom and land of immigrants. Josephine Lee illuminates how the daily usage of racially marked objects has been an important site where racial relationships are instantiated and enacted. Thus, Lee's analysis of how, when, and why Japanese things earned immense popularity during America's Gilded Age may point us not only to how things came to bear racial structure, but also how they have become the primary channel through which racial relationships are shaped and reproduced.

As Asian things became bearers of racialization, the allure of the Asian thing was accompanied by certain modes of consumption. Lee explains: "Decorative orientalism in America is more than stylistic design. It encompasses a certain set of attitudes and practices that go along with Asian objects, whether in everyday use or in more theatrical settings" ("American Decorative Orientalism" 4). Correct historical or cultural

information, or the object's usage in Asia, were less important than the enactment of racial fantasy in everyday life—Asia was emptied of its content while Asian things became the conduit through which the mundane everyday was transformed into a remote space. This perhaps explains the equal popularity of imported and imitative things.

Among Lee's insights, I would like to draw upon the ease with which Asianness is achieved ("with a modicum of expense and little or no knowledge of Asian countries or people") by engaging the performer's ability to use things to transform both self and the immediate environment to Asia ("American Decorative Orientalism" 2). The commodification of Asian culture in the everyday was made complete with the thing that literally reified Asian culture and the consumer's established relationship with Asian domestic commodities. I suggest that this consumptive racial performance can be linked to a reader's ability to work with a handful of ethnically-marked things in a narrative to create expansive textual world of Asian American culture. The ways in which the reader, the consumer, and the performer engage with Asian things, especially familiar representative Asian things, necessitate similar phenomenological processes of association. Building on Barthes' earlier argument on the reality effect, Elaine Auyoung offers a phenomenological exploration of how realist writers rely on fragmentary details to create the impression of something more out there, that is, of the vast world that exists beyond the confines of the text. To do this, Auyoung argues, novelists engage the "reader's everyday readiness to recognize what fragmentary cues imply" (582). Our everyday experience in perceiving the world necessitates handling the deficit of information by bringing in "our preexisting knowledge and expectations to bear on the stimulus presented to us" (Auyoung 584). Hence Auyoung suggests that "[r]ecognizing

that fragmentary details serve as cues or building blocks for creating implied fictional worlds" (583). The reading of Asian American texts necessitates a similar ability of the reader to work with aesthetic suggestions to create an implied Asian American culture. The performer associates the Asian thing with the extravagant Asian culture, just as the reader is led to imagine the larger Asian American culture undergirding the narrative when seeing a culturally marked-thing forming that narrative's backdrop. The fact that these literary insertions are not intimidating has an interesting parallel to the consumptive practice of decorative, domestic Asian things. Whether in the form of decorative household objects or insertions in a literary text, the primacy over the thing of the person who is using, possessing, enacting, or reading is noteworthy.

With this historical background in mind, I now turn to some of the aesthetic tropes relating to the new definition of "American" found in *Native Speaker* to consider how Asian American writers might struggle with commitment and creativity.

Henry, the Perfect American

Jodi Melamed and Ming Hyoung Song's arguments illuminate the particular effect of literature in creating emotional bonds with readers, specifically in calling for feelings of understanding and empathy. This bonding sustains a parallel yet contradictory racial identification: on the one hand, identification with the racialized subject through the power of literature to share experience, but also the reaffirmation of a non-Asian identity for most readers. This movement between two positions, according to Melamed, ultimately results in the constitution of a privileged reading/national subject as white, even while it sustains the particular reading practice of literature defined as "minority."

Native Speaker at first partakes in this dynamic, soothing non-Asian readers' curiosity about Asian American culture but also presenting such culture as something that will not overpower more "American" values. Any degree of Korean-ness is contained, forming a part of and enriching American culture, rather than directly challenging it. This is visible in the novel's narrative structure, which resolves racial tension in various ways. For instance, the protagonist comes to terms with both Asian (home) and American culture. Henry's precarious positioning within Korean culture, as demonstrated by his strained relationship with first generation immigrants like his father and Ahjuhma, positions him as an understanding racial intermediary. Henry's explanations excuse non-Korean readers from feeling sorry for their ignorance, emphasizing only their liberality and willingness to learn. Henry's own struggle depicts what seems to be an outlandish culture, thus paralleling the reader's presumed alienation from Korean-ness.

Native Speaker engages with the problem of dismantling the reader's expectation of transparent ethnic culture through making the figure of Henry a quintessentially self-made American man. This national ethos is yoked to the culture of mass production. The intensification of industrialization and mass production that characterizes American modernity also demands an ability to make or re-make Asian immigrants into American citizens. Asian Americans are racialized in terms of their utility value, then, a process that is intricately coupled with the value placed on the self-made man, or the "man-object," that Asian American model minorities perfectly instantiate. In this context, the reader's emotional bond with Henry necessitates empathizing with his predilection for American culture, as epitomized by his ability to copy American things exactly.

In *Native Speaker,* Chang-rae Lee depicts Henry as a figure fascinated with copies of things to comment on the racialization of Asian American people as mass-producible and reproducible. Henry is obsessed with production and reproduction, and his inclination is suited to the culture of mass production. For instance, the qualities that enhance his value at work are linked to his ability to write textbook reports that others are instructed to emulate. These reports are praised by the CEO Hoagland as "flawless" and "perfect," as even better than the originals. He sets a model for others to imitate, in exact detail and without delinquencies. His mimetic ability models the repetition and exactitude of the larger culture of mechanical mass-production. Moreover, Henry's fastidiousness comes from his comfort with copies as opposed to real, authentic, or original objects, actions, and people. This intimates Henry's desire to be a perfect copy of himself, made indistinguishable from racially-unmarked white Americans.

His ability to deliver what is expected of him makes not only his work reports but also his spying excellent too. He not only makes copies that are even better than the originals, but he makes himself a perfect copy of the normative American person. He is a keen observer. His racialized Asian body and racial performance— both of his model Asian Americanness and of whiteness—are seen as perfect because they do not disturb but rather uphold his desire to produce himself as a perfect copy of the American individual. Henry is therefore not merely a fake-copier of American culture but a perfect incarnation of that culture, where the copy is more valued than the original, or where the distinction between original and copy is no longer even meaningful.

Henry perceives his own existence as a copy of non-identifiable American-ness. Even his social skills, sexual charm, and relationships are contingent upon his ability to

estimate what is demanded of him and to meet the expectation exactly. In other words, Henry is at his best in acting out scripted forms of subjectivity. This makes him indistinguishable from the multiple copies of his own persona. Which version of him is the original is of less interest for this chapter than the fact that his reproducibility, even to the point of his mass-producing his own self, is a radical ability to become the self-made man, Asian American style. This, I suggest, is the exhibition of Henry's quintessentially American sensibility.

This text's central concern with the real and the copy in the age of reproducibility, I suggest, enables us to think about the ways Asian American writers find to balance self-commodification and resistance in response to the dominant expectation of Asian American cultural practice. Henry's fixation on copies over the real, to the point where the copy is favored over the real, or where the distinction between the two becomes virtually non-existent, is the stark vision of America that *Native Speaker* communicates. In questioning who counts as American, and how and when, *Native Speaker* subtly disrupts easy conceptions of race, ethnic particularity, and America itself.

Conclusion: National Things and the Horizon of Expectation

The link between the practice of consuming domestic goods and experiencing Asian American culture is not separable from the burgeoning consumer culture and the first mass import of Asian things. Over time, however, such diffuse commodity fetishism intensified, impacting people's perception of Asian America at large. As Christopher Bush illustrates, Asian things were valued more than Asian immigrants during America's Gilded Age, and this structure of perception lingers to the present. This insight suggests

how the intensification of neoliberalism has a specific inflection with regard to Asian American people and Asian things.

This same Orientalist and capitalist condition also shaped the consumption of Asian American literary works. The pleasure with which Asian things have been consumed is part of these reading practices. Are Asian American characters (and indeed, Asian American writers) people, things, or both?

The consumption of literature by and about racial minorities has a long history in the United States. Jodi Melamed tracks the institutionalization of these reading practices after World War II as the escalation of a racial logic within the marketing of American books, rather than the progressive incorporation of racial minority texts into the American canon. Melamed argues that the prevalence of a liberal ethos after World War II produced the understanding of racism as prejudice and ignorance, a feeling, habit, or moral vice that threatens America, and as a problem that can be solved with proper education. Literature by racial minorities was taken up as the pedagogical solution to race problems in the United States, which then created the condition where some literary texts were marked by their racial and ethnic traits instead of others. As "practical and effective tools that Americans can use to get to know difference," literary works by racial minorities stood in for people (Melamed, *Represent or Destroy* 15). This, according to Melamed, happened due to the postwar intensification of liberalism, during which the logic of the market economy penetrated the conception of culture so that culture was seen as commodity to be owned and consumed. In particular, racial minority culture was seen not only as susceptible to consumption, but also as something that enlightened American citizens *should* actively consume in order to participate in a practice of moral antiracism

befitting modern America. Literature became an influential tool to maintain what counts as official discourse on race, held up to educate American subjects.

In this context, the notion of ethnic minority culture as consumable, and further, the understanding of such an approach as moral, enlightened, and antiracist, came to be one of the normative modes of belonging in the United States. The United States' global configuration as a newly risen superpower, equipped with the unique capacity to handle domestic race problems, shaped the privileged position held by literature in creating the modern American subject. Specifically, it impacted the construction of white as the managerial subject, in creating "heroic white liberal as a privileged national and racial subject" who ought to participate in the consumptive reading practice (Melamed, *Represent or Destroy* 23). In other words, the institutionalization of race novels entailed directing the habit of interpretation that would establish the white as the ideal reader who would come to understand racialized minorities through the practice of reading. It also produced racialized minorities as the object of knowledge, which created the environment where white and non-white would come to accept the objectified position of the non-white as proper—Melamed explains how, for instance, African American readers were expected to internalize a normative mode of being an American citizen by reading literature. In other words, a belief in the transformative power of literature also conditions normative interpretive practices for the reader and directs modes of belonging in the United States. With this in mind, Song's earlier observation of the habituated reading practice of caring for white characters when reading novels suggests that, regardless of the reader's racial identity as white or non-white, it is commonplace for the American reader to "care about" and even identify with white characters. This reading practice is

related to the self-definition of the United States as a white nation, but it is moreover a progressive development of that logic such that whites are seen as the ideal managers of other races; white Americans become the leaders of the global economy, armed with an awareness of diversity and a racial sensitivity that comes from handling domestic race problems and reading global literature.

While Melamed discusses the pervasive liberal ethos that impacted the perception of racial and ethnic minority in American culture, David Palumbo-Liu tracks the changes from the 1960s to the 1990s that created the conditions for incorporating ethnic literature within American literary curricula. He lists a number of social factors that influenced the establishment of ethnic studies department in colleges in the 1960s and early 1970s and the exponential growth of ethnic minority studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. His list of factors makes visible how various groups' different agendas converged:

> [T]he continued momentum of the curricular and social changes of the 1960s that has taken place against (and is perhaps fueled by) the resistance posed to them by the Reagan-Bush agenda (this momentum may be attributable to the persistent activity of both older activist academics and newer progressive members of the profession, as well as politicized students); the marked shift in the demographics of the college-age population, which brought about wholesale "recruiting" of particularly defined "diverse" undergraduates by universities (here the market economy of the university makes diversity not necessarily a desirable goal in itself, but rather a necessary economic consideration); and the recognition of the need for a newly skilled workforce that has to draw upon what educators call "nontraditional" students—that is, those from the margins. In other words, the

> current prevalence of "diversity" in today's social discourse may be traced to the convergence of a number of heterogeneous interests, some of which remain entirely ambivalent to the assumptions of the others. (*Ethnic Canon* 7)

These social factors reflect the significant demographic transformation in the United States in relation to the United States' series of imperial interventions in the Asia-Pacific. As Palumbo-Liu shows, the mode of racial management shifted to address the changing situation—the marked expansion of Asian American literature should be considered within this larger institutional incorporation of racial literature.

However, the argument that American society has absorbed the progressive ethos of the 1960s cannot wholly explain the current situation. Uncontainable creative responses and resistances by racial minorities cannot be overlooked. For instance, Min Hyoung Song suggests that the particularity of works by Asian American writers who are born and raised in this context stems from "their ability to cope with, and even to thrive on, the onrush of racial expectations that saturates their work," whether "the writers discussed herein realize it or not, whether they want it or not" (10). Song's emphasis on the ability to cope with racial expectations found in this generation of Asian American writers is noteworthy. The social context within which these writers are born and bred forces them to share a horizon of racial expectations, which the writers engage variously, from non-engagement to efforts to challenge the prevailing expectations. Song points to this heightened consciousness of race and difference as giving their work a special vibrancy, though it may constrict, influence, and shape them in the process.

The specific generation of Asian American writers addressed by Song were born after the famous Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Calling these writers the

"children of 1965," Song explains that they are "heirs to seismic changes in demographics, political sensibilities, and legal protections, as well as to the four decades of the libertarian tilt in electoral politics that have occurred since" (75). This social context armed the writers with the sensibility to wrestle with questions of difference and race critically, rather than to internalize the logic of racial management. Song suggests:

> In their myriad ways, they carefully and creatively wrestle with the specific racial expectations that condition, surround, enable, and possibly choke the lives their works seek to imagine. While they each focus explicitly on individual characters, as individuals these characters are stymied by hopes and dread intimately related to the topic of race that exceed attempts at self-definition, agency, and autonomy. By struggling with such expectations, their works also give texture to the ways in which race both affects and does not affect lived experiences, personal longings, and aspirations for meaningful existence. (30)

The specificity of these writers in their ability to reconcile various cultural norms and expectations makes their work vibrant in its various responses—from conformism to radicalism—to the literary market and the larger society.

With this context in mind, the details in the narrative that announce themselves as coming from Asian American culture can be seen as a response to the demand for ethnic performance and identitarian reading practices. Even before starting to read, the reader will know that *Native Speaker* was almost certainly written by an Asian American because of the name of the author and because of his huge Asian face on the back cover of the book. These are more overtly registered examples of ethnic performance, probably a decision of the publishing company made from their sense of how this book would and

should fit in the American book market. The details in the narrative, on the other hand, are the subtler trace of ethnic performance, demanded both by Asian American and non-Asian American audiences alike. In this sense, even though the inclusion of culturally-marked details might seem like an easy aesthetic decision to make, it is not separable from larger political debates. The italics and details are the traces of the ideologically vexed social condition of Asian Americans. Hence, whether the details are included to prove the novel's authentic Asian Americanness or not, or whether they were a conscious response to larger social demands or not, is less important than that these details mark the convergence of various desires: of Asian American writers in their aesthetic and racial allegiance, of the Asian American reading public and its desire to recognize its own cultural traits, and the non-Asian American reading public and its desire to consume what is different yet not too different. Whichever way it was conceived, it bears the imprint of Asian Americans' uneasy position as a minority in American society. The practice of signifying Asian American-ness through cultural details in the narrative, then, reflects the anxieties of Asian American writers, who need to negotiate various sets of expectations and pressures to represent themselves authentically.

Timothy Brennan's approach to artistic authenticity also offers an interesting parallel to Song's insight. In *Secular Devotion: Afro-Latin Music and Imperial Jazz*, Brennan offers a definition of authenticity with a commitment to embrace the fullness of the term: "degrees of faithfulness to the sites and times of experience where composition took place, with the clarity and integrity with which an artist adapted his or her material, and above all, with the artist's (real or imputed) desire for freedom from the anti-music standardization of mass marketing" (90). Brennan's insight extends to my examination of

how the literary references to Korean things makes visible a contested field of composition for Asian American writers; these details must be examined in terms of their purposes rather than just what and how they represent. In other words, there are high stakes in questions of artistic authenticity in Asian American fiction. Other than the aesthetic illusion inevitably accompanying the reading of fictional texts that Auyoung highlights, Asian American texts have been long perceived in America as bearing closer proximity to reality—that is, what is depicted in the text is read as presenting anthropological information regarding Asian Americans. Although the ideological valence and social significance defining Asian American literature have shifted, the loyalty debate still continues today. And whether conscious of it or not, Asian American writers who are born and bred in this society respond to such demands and expectations in various ways.

Taking this history into account, Christopher Lee's *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* explores the category of "Asian America," which is both a demographic category born with political aspirations as well as a critical position. He examines how the stakes of Asian American Studies have changed with the post-identity turn in the field after the 1990s and the critique of identity politics. After engaging with various Asian American scholars to track the changing contours of the field, he ends the introduction to this text with a provocative question:

> [T]his book is undoubtedly a post-identity project, but, by the same token, it remains embedded in the identitarian assumptions it seeks to critique. Its goal, then, is to contend with the ubiquity and staying power of these assumptions and investments by focusing on the complexities of literary representation . . . What

> makes Asian American identity so compelling and alluring when we have never been under the impression that it is anything but constructed and, perhaps, illusory? (22)

As Lee's question suggests, Asian American literary representation and the category of "Asian American" that the representation would be expected to signify are complex. After all, what can be considered an authentic representation of a heterogeneous group's reality is a debatable issue. But when it comes to Asian American literature, there is a history of a long fight for recognition of Asian Americans in America—and Asian American literature has been critically employed for the representation and empowering of Asian Americans. This has often resulted in a demand for loyalty to what is perceived as Asian American. Such a demand is inseparable from the lack of representation, or stereotypical representation, of Asians in American culture, and the response of Asian Americans to redress these absences or harmful images. Even when the attention to Asia was keen, Asian America has for too long been conflated with Asia. For example, when the avant-garde writers of the 1960s turned to Asia as a source of artistic inspiration and often incorporated issues or techniques pertaining to Asian culture and society, they were not interested in the struggles of domestic writers of Asian descent, who were fighting various issues at home.[6] This neglect, along with the reading practices of ethnic minority texts and the specific experiences and material circumstance of Asian American people, have led many Asian American writers to move away from the dominant imagination of Asia. Such a shift has resulted in new artistic goals and expressions for Asian American writers and their "things" in their search of what constitutes the Asian American as distinct from (though not opposed to) the Asian.

[1] Last checked on 4/30/15.

[2] See Robert Lee, Eugenia Kaw and David Palumbo-Liu among others for more information.

[3] For more, please see Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture.*

[4] I translated the originally Korean posting. The original reads: "시대착오적인 할머니 한복에서도 볼 수 있듯 이 책은 "한국적인 이야기를 써야해. 특히 일러스트도 한국적인걸 많이 많이 어필해야해." 라고 무리하게 굳은 결심을 하고 만든 책 같달까요… 사진에 보이듯 벽에 한국 전통 연장식 보세요. 제 일생동안 집에 연 달아놓은 집 못봤음요. 한국적임을 넘 어필하려다보니 오히려 한국적임에 대한 보편성을 잃은 느낌?"

[5] Ming Hyoung Song's discussion of this point does not mean that Asian American writers have conformed to the cultural logic. Rather, Song suggests that the awareness of such logic provokes Asian American writers to challenge such ways of thinking and engage race more critically.

[6] For more, please see Timothy Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965*.

Epilogue

‘Rescuing’ North Korea:
Asian American Literature and the Limits of Empathy

Conventional American thinking about North Korea follows two interpretive paths. On the one hand, the critique of the regime and the Kim family, ranging from open ridicule to trenchant denunciation, ultimately focuses on their inhumaneness. On the other hand, there is also a depiction of the people who suffer starvation and oppression, positioning them as sympathetic objects requiring humanitarian relief. This bifurcated image of the evil dictator and the poor people largely informs how most Americans understand North Korea today. Regardless of where on the spectrum your imagination of North Korea lies, the dominant imagination of the country tends to evoke the sense that it is *absolutely foreign* to the United States—that it is counterpositioned to the United States: almost a mirror image, if you will.

However, I wish to consider a potential shift in the discursive framework of North Korea. Specifically, I argue that the North Korean people are increasingly recognized and imagined as the next wave of immigrant Americans—or, more precisely, the next wave of *Asian* Americans. How and why have such incomprehensibly different people come to be seen as assimilable to the United States? To examine these questions I will be closely examining two memoirs: first, North Korean defector Yeonmi Park’s *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girls’ Journey to Freedom,* and then Korean American writer Suki Kim’s *Without You There Is No Us: My Time with the Sons of North Korea’s Elite.*

I contend that these memoirs help to sustain the current dominant understanding of North Korea, by crafting the discourse surrounding the needs of the country and its people in terms of human rights issues. This discursive framework has been built, I further propose, because of the continuance of the Korean War, as the discursive structure used to represent North Korea is an outgrowth and transformation of Cold War logic. These two memoirs demonstrate that contemporary representations of North Korea tend to narrativize a Cold War pattern of rehabilitation, where the U.S. must strive to save the enemy after the fighting ceases.

After the Cold War, with the development of a changed global political climate wherein the U.S. defines itself as an arbiter of world peace, an older model of militarism had to be diluted. In the case of North Korea, there is a discursive shift away from the Kim regime, which still drives the U.S. policy toward North Korea, to the country's people. The model of the evil inhumane regime, which alone was enough during the Cold War era to justify Western opposition, now has been subdued so that it remains vestigial—remembered but remaindered to the realm of jokes. By attending to the North Korean *people* who need to be rescued from this evil regime, however, American militarism can earn validity while remaining hidden and illegible.

Once the possibility that members of the North Korean population could arrive in the U.S. is articulated, however, it requires a rethinking of the North Korean subject. Namely, the North Korean subject is constructed in empathic ways that demonstrate how it shares certain characteristics with Americans and can possibly assimilate into the future American population. With this context in mind, I will track some of the cultural and

legal ways North Koreans are now being groomed as an assimilable population while simultaneously dismissing the practical means to actualize this possibility.

This new phase in imagining North Koreans as potential Americans could be seen in 2011 with the drafting and endorsement of a bill that offered a more concrete way for North Korean children to become American—through international adoption. Supporters produced several short YouTube PSAs aimed at mobilizing constituent endorsement of this bill by Topple Hunger in North Korea (known by its acronym, THiNK). In one of these PSAs, Korean Canadian actress Sandra Oh, the most famous public supporter of the bill, urges the viewer to sign the petition for H.R. 1464 or the North Korean Refugee Adoption Act of 2011. And the PSA had a real impact. Before Oh's PSA in November 2011, a few thousand people signed the petition, but by July 2012, the petition had over 60,000 signatures.[1] This bill passed the House in 2011, and after some revisions, President Obama signed what is now called the North Korean Child Welfare Act of 2012 in January 2013.

I want to take a moment to consider the strong affective appeal made by Sandra Oh. Oh hails the viewer as having an existing knowledge of the dire and hopeless situation of North Korea. With this, she not only assumes, but rather engineers the normative framework of understanding the target children as in a "dire and hopeless . . . situation," which is exacerbated by her slippage from children to orphans, made even more effective by the pause that makes the equation of the two different subjects almost seamless. The slippage reframes the children as orphans, who are living in "a foreign land, alone, and without family." However, unlike Oh's reconstruction of these children as state-less and family-less, the children whom the bill targets tend to have nationality

and families in reality. The bill targets two groups of North Korean children. The first are those living outside North Korea and now alone because they have been separated from their families due to the escape; for them, there is a chance that their families are alive in North Korea or that they have escaped too, separately from their children. The second group it targets are children with Chinese fathers and North Korean mothers.

The proponents of this bill, then, imagine North Korean Americans. Furthermore, it relies on the viewer's empathetic ability to respond to affective appeal. First, it constructs these children as family-less and state-less; then, it makes the North Korean hunger a legal concern for the U.S. With these sentimental tropes, it disciplines the viewer into taking on the ethical obligation to see himself as a global citizen, which can be affirmed by his response of caring for this issue, of signing the petition, and finally, of adopting these North Korean children. The necessity for these actions is urgent according to Oh, signaled by her use of such phrases as "there is a bill in congress *right now*," "very few days left," and her concluding remark, "please sign on *now* and make saving these children possible."

If this PSA directs the viewer's perception so that the children are made legible only as poor orphans who need to be rescued by Americans, it is just as facile in eliding the complicated reality: for instance, China's current recognition of these children as Chinese citizens, if at least one of their parents is Chinese, and the complexity, if not near impossibility, of legally adopting those children with Chinese citizenship; the problem of finding a North Korean child who, for obvious reasons, would be hiding and then of persuading that child to be adopted; and the difficulty of coming up with feasible plans to work with South Korea, given its own claim that everyone from the Korean peninsula,

encompassing both North and South, is a Korean citizen. The thorny reality that the law purports to remediate but in actuality does not quite address, is reflected only in the change of the law's name from the North Korean Refugee Adoption Act to the North Korean Child Welfare Act. For these reasons, transnational Asian American scholar Christine Hong vehemently critiques this bill as "aimed not at resolving North Korean hunger, much less the well-being of the children whom it willfully misrepresents."[2] All this, despite the fact that this bill claims to "advocate for the best interests of North Korean children and children of one North Korean parent."

This is one of several laws that constructs North Korean hunger as a pertinent issue for the United States and imagines North Koreans as needing rescue from the impossible regime of the Kims. It also proposes the solution that the U.S. open its door and welcome North Koreans. A series of laws expresses a similar sentiment. In October 2004, President Bush signed the North Korean Human Rights Act H.R.4011. On May, 2006, the first group of North Koreans granted refugee status entered the United States. In 2008, President Obama signed the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act. According to this act, once granted refugee status, North Koreans become eligible to apply for permanent residency after a year. And after five years, they are permitted to apply for U.S. citizenship.[3] These laws attest to the shifting perception of the North Korean people—from poor people locked up in a faraway land to future Americans. However, the discrepancy between the welcoming face of the law and the practical implementation of the law is stark. Including this first group, approximately 170 North Koreans have been admitted into the U.S. as refugees by 2015. Compared to other

refugee groups in the United States, such as the Vietnamese, Somali, or Hmong, the North Korean refugees are significantly fewer in number.

Nonetheless, this emerging cultural and legal imagination—along with the actual presence of North Koreans who have come in the U.S. in the last decade and the 2014 UN report that directed Americans' attention to North Korean individuals who have escaped the regime—paved the way for a new generation of North Korean refugee narratives. These narratives began to emerge, starting last year.

North Korean defector narratives did exist prior to this. The earlier narratives generally fall into two categories: either those written by a Western journalist who interviewed one or more North Korean defectors; or those written by defectors who settled in South Korea and wrote theirs memoirs in Korean before their translation into English. Two better-known ones are *Escape from Camp 14* and *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*. *Escape from Camp 14* is the first type. It was written by Blaine Harden using in-depth interviews with a North Korean defector name Shin Dong-Hyuk.[4] *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* is similar but a bit different; it was co-authored by a North Korean defector and a French journalist, and even though each wrote a separate introduction, the body of the text is in the first person.

Last year, a string of North Korean defector memoirs were published in America. Unlike the previous generation of North Korean narratives, the three released last year—*The Girl with Seven Names* by Hyeonseo Lee, *Under the Same Sky* by Joseph Kim, and *In Order to Live* by Yeonmi Park[5] —are publicized as written by defectors in English (albeit with the help of contributors), even though their native language is Korean.[6] There is a notable difference in the font size of the names of these contributing writers and the

defectors on the book covers, especially in comparison to *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*. Moreover, these contributors, whether journalists or professional writers, do not leave a trace in these texts as the journalistic collaborator did with his introduction to *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*. Except for the cover page, publication information, and acknowledgements, there role is scarcely acknowledged. Unlike the previous narratives, these memoirs seem to promise a heightened intimacy between the reader and the defector, by creating an illusion that the defector is directly telling the story, without any loss entailed by translation or by the mediation of a professional writer.

But the biggest difference between the earlier narratives and these three memoirs published last year, I suggest, lies in the subject matter. The previous memoirs mainly discuss the atrocities of the regime and the harrowing living conditions in North Korea. But these three focus more on portraying the everyday lives of ordinary North Koreans and positioning North Koreans as potential members of the global community. This second point is established through the writer's success in becoming part of that community after leaving North Korea—which rhetorically serves as the proof that other North Koreans could become like them too, if only given a chance. Their transformation into global citizens, however, does not come without reservations. Hyeonseo Lee, the author of *The Girl with Seven Names*, said in an interview that she was worried that her story was too plain. Prior to publication, she did not think her story about the ordinary everyday lives of North Koreans would attract people's attention, and she expressed her pleasant surprise when it did. Considering that after giving a TED talk she was approached by the major publisher Harper-Collins with a detailed plan for her memoir, and that Yeonmi Park was similarly approached by Penguin after her speech at One

Young World, it is possible to surmise why their narratives share the larger American trend in thinking and seeing North Korea. These defectors repeatedly express their continuing struggle to adjust to life outside North Korea in their memoirs, interviews, and talks. We can expect that it was not only their English that was "helped" by the contributors, who are professional, English-speaking, Western-educated writers; their interpretation of their own narratives and of their current presence in the U.S. were probably also influenced by these contributors, to make their stories intelligible to American and international readers.

Yeonmi Park's *In Order to Live* exemplifies how these recent North Korean memoirs are shaped by a particular methodology governing the conception and representation of North Korea in the United States. Park became an iconic North Korean defector through her talk at the One Young World in 2014.[7] Her seven-minute speech about her escape from North Korea went viral. The last paragraph of Park's acknowledgement, at the end of the memoir, reads as follows:

> For all the supporters around the world who send me encouraging and touching messages through social media: I could never acknowledge you all in this small space, but you know who you are. Every smile, every small gesture, every tear you shed with me gave me the courage to share a story that I never thought I would share with anyone. Thank you for believing in me. There were times when I had lost my faith in humanity, but you have heard me. You have cared. And this is how, together, we begin to change the world. (273)

Park underscores the bonding between her and her reader—a bonding that Park would not have noticed without the reader's "smile," "small gesture," and "tear," the signs that

show the reader's empathy and compassion, as Park notes: "you have heard me. You have cared" (273). Park also points out that she and her reader are not just bonding but building a community together by sharing stories: the reader sends Park "encouraging and touching messages through social media" and Park in turn musters "the courage to share a story that I never thought I would share with anyone" (273)., Park sees the emergence of an imagined community united by a shared affective concern for the North Korean people. Park's final words are the following: "this is how, together, we begin to change the world" (273). Not North Korea, but the world—her construct of a new affective global community allows her to remap North Korea as coterminous with the world.

Positing an imagined community held together by its belief in humanity, Park demands that this community share an obligation to stand up for this belief too. Park is not simply presenting an interesting story of an absolutely foreign land to the reader. Rather, she is hailing the reader as a witness and active participant who not only *can* but *should* intervene in North Korea's heinous infringement of global human rights, because it is not *their* problem but *our* problem, a problem for humanity. The same sentiment is articulated in her second One Young World speech in Bangkok 2015, after her book came out:

> Through my journey, I didn't only learn how to survive. But I learned what it means to be a human being. And there were times I lost all faith in humanity. Because people were the worst things . . . But last year at One Young World, you restored my faith in humanity again . . . you cared because we share humanity together . . .

> Injustice around the world, human rights violation [*sic*]. We think that it's just their problem, that it might not affect us. But we have a terrible confirmation last week. It's not only their problem anymore. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, injustice anywhere is a threat of justice everywhere. And now, at this moment, this is our rights, our liberty. And I want to again, to raise our voice, that we have to fight for our liberty and rights. And I hope we can shape the world into a better place.[8]

Park defines a human being as having the ability to empathize with the other. And this ability to think of the world as connected makes North Korea "not *their* problem" but ours. Lumping North Korean hunger, the Paris attack, and other terrorism in the world into the same categories of "injustice" and "human rights violation," she mandates that the world stand up for North Korea, which, according to her, equates to standing up for the self. It is not only from readers and audiences that she demands certain action. In fact, in her memoir, Park repeatedly underscores various transformations that she herself has undergone to fit in to the global community, where neoliberal values previously foreign to her, such as choice, freedom, and individuality, are mandatory.

If Park seeks entry into global citizenship, Korean American novelist and journalist Suki Kim's memoir paints a different picture. Kim's memoir is titled *Without You There Is No Us: My Time with the Sons of North Korea's Elite,* and it was also published in 2015. This memoir shares the same ethical obligation with other North Korean defector memoirs—that of telling the stark truth about North Korea to the world. However, rather than emphasizing the power of empathy, Kim's memoir illustrates the

limit of empathetic bonding due to the insurmountable ideological divide between her and North Koreans.

Kim's memoir tracks her experience of teaching English to the 270 elite students at the all-male Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) during the last six months of Kim Jong-Il's reign. Throughout the course of her memoir, Kim and her North Korean students bond tightly. Kim left her home, family, and lover to be in North Korea, while her students also left home to attend the boarding school; she and they felt isolated and lonely, and, as the final words of Kim's prologue states, "All we had was one another" (1).

Kim repeatedly stresses her rather immediate identification with the North Korean students, given their shared physical, linguistic, and historical experience of the division of the Korean peninsula. Under her list of "unique circumstances that allowed for a fuller experience," she mentions that it was the first year of PUST and that there was an impending regime change with the rapidly deteriorating health of Kim Jong-Il. If these two factors made the students more sensitive, vulnerable and open, the common language allowed the students to bond specifically with Kim ("the fact that I was a native speaker of Korean, which gave us a common language" [291]). Also, here and again she discusses how their shared longing for a unified nation linked the students to Kim, despite the reality that each Korea seeks to win over the other. The political situation remains elided under their shared desire for one Korea for the most of the memoir. And because of her apparently easy bonding with the students, Kim does not lose faith that she *can* and that she *should* teach these students some of the quintessential American (and

also neoliberal) values, such as freedom, choice, and individualism. Kim records her frustrations at this for the most part of the memoir.

However, the memoir ends by capturing the complete breakdown of her previously achieved identification with her students. Kim's final picture of North Korea captures stark ideological differences that ultimately frustrate Kim and the empathetic rapport that she has been so meticulously building. The last scene captures her effort to say goodbye to her students one last time on her last day at PUST. Her last day coincidentally is the day that Kim Jong-Il died:

> I looked and looked at each one of my beautiful boys, whom I knew I would not be able to see again. I watched them raise their spoons to their mouths. I watched them pick up their trays, and cast their eyes in my direction with no recognition, as though I no longer existed for them in this world that was now missing their Great Leader. Yet I continued facing them, just in case one of them looked up and noticed that their world had now changed, perhaps for the better. (284-85)

Ultimately, Kim realizes that what seemed to be an immediate bonding between her and her students was actually very fragile. Issues like citizenship, nationalism, shared language and history, and even shared humanity are not enough to cross the ideological gap that separates Kim from her students. The multiple levels of bonding that she and her students have been building up to this point are shattered as the ideological chasm between them is exposed. With the news of the death of Kim Jong-Il, the students cannot even recognize Kim, who does not share the same worldview as them. In this moment of crisis, Kim's alien presence overtakes her and her physical presence is suddenly made

illegible to the students. For this reason, the students cannot grasp the fact that Kim, just like their Great Leader, is leaving them at this very same moment.

Furthermore, Kim foresees that her text will not allow all of her readers to empathize with her, even as she, like Yeonmi Park, gestures to the reader that the world's knowledge of "the stark truth about North Korea" will ultimately improve the country (291). This is the final paragraph of her Author's Note:

> I have written this book with the knowledge that it will anger the DPRK regime, the president of PUST, and my former colleagues there. Although I am sorry to cause the president and faculty of PUST distress, I feel a greater obligation, both as a writer and as someone deeply concerned about the future of Korea, to tell the stark truth about the DPRK, in hopes that the lives of average North Koreans, including my beloved students, will one day improve. (291)

While Suki Kim makes a similar gesture toward the ethical obligation to tell this story for the development of North Korea, she does so with the recognition of the different positionalities of various people involved with North Korea. While she judges that her choice of telling "the stark truth about the DPRK" is ethically superior and more effective in improving North Korea over the efforts of "the regime, the president of PUST, and [her] former colleagues," she acknowledges that everyone involved thinks that he is helping North Korea, albeit with different agendas, approaches, and beliefs.

It is significant that the deep-seated ideological differences between Korean American Kim and the North Korean students cannot just be washed away by wishful thinking or even by months of warm empathetic bonding. Empathy and affective forms of thinking about North Korea may bring some improvement for North Korean human

rights, as many people, including policy makers and North Korean defectors like Yeonmi Park, suggest. However, this dominant way of understanding North Korea is the present version of a Cold War logic that continues to shape ideological and discursive forms of conceptualizing the country as fundamentally "other" and in need of outside help. The U.S. and North and South Korea have not moved away from the structure of enmity and dogged reliance on ideological difference, and they continually fall back into the shadow of the unresolved Korean War. Unless we examine these Cold War structures dating back to the Korean War era, the humanitarian and empathetic bonding is at risk of being shattered at any moment, as Suki Kim reveals.

After tracking formations and patterns that extend beyond recent North Korean narratives to social and political trends in memoirs about North Korea, I contend that the current human rights framework in thinking about North Korea diverts our attention away from governments and political history to focus only on the people who validate America's efforts to intervene and "save."

The perceived urgency of the North Korean issue, including hunger and the government's occasional military provocations, necessitates that these people stand out as North Koreans. This is different from how other refugees are positioned in the American imaginary. The history of America's involvement in a number of wars led to the growth of refugees in modern America. In this context, Vietnamese American literary scholar Timothy K. August observes that "there is something disquieting about the aesthetic qualities that accompany and define the refugee experience." He explains:

> At first, the refugee is produced, detained, and contained at a distance, unable to fully inhabit the nearness necessary for intimate understanding—visible without

> being knowable. The refugee figure is subsequently asked to transform this isolated position into a phantasmic entity, disappearing from plain sight when incorporated into the national body. (175)

While this statement is largely true for North Korean defectors, in contrast to other refugee groups, North Koreans—whether those who have become North Korean *Americans* or those who have not but continue to appear in American media—are not asked to fully assimilate into the national body; in fact they are required to stand out as exemplary, grateful subjects. They may be future Americans, but they are still drawn into the extended Cold War project of rehabilitating enemies only to then save them.

Within the current humanitarian framework of understanding North Korea, it is difficult to discern a *political* agenda because it is so often fashioned as a *moral* agenda. However, we have witnessed with each new group of Asian Americans, from the Chinese Exclusion era to recent refugee migrations, that what bars them from being accepted as full-fledged Americans or what constructs them as a particular type of American (e.g., the model minority, the yellow peril, or the tiger mom) has driven Asian American aesthetic innovations and their critical energy. How this new generation of North Koreans and North Korean Americans will challenge the current understanding of human rights, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States, remains to be seen.

[1] Christine Hong, "The Fiction of the North Korean Refugee Orphan."

[2] Ibid.

[3] Financial support of $200 to $300 per month for up to eight months.

[4] It is worth pointing out that Shin first published a memoir in Korean in South Korea, but the memoir did not sell very well and it soon went out of print. Shin says in a number of interviews that he was shocked by South Korean people's lack of interest in North Korean issues, and this led him to seek other venues to communicate the reality of North Korea, eventually leading him to move to the United States.

[5] Among the three, only Joseph Kim is a refugee in America and the other two are South Koran citizens. Eunsun Kim's *A Thousand Miles to Freedom: My Escape from North Korea* is often grouped with the three named memoirs. But I did not include Kim's book in this epilogue, since it was first published in South Korea and then translated into English.

[6] These three North Korean defectors first became famous by giving talks at international conferences and forums including TED (the first two) and One Young World (Park). All three were first approached by major publishing companies that came up with plans, including suggested contributing writers, for their memoirs. The companies in question are Penguin Press (*In Order to Live*). William Collins, a division of Harper Collins (*The Girl with Seven Names*), and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (*Under the Same Sky*).

[7] One Young World is "the global forum for young leaders aged 18-30 where they discuss the pressing issues the world faces." From the website https://www.oneyoungworld.com/about-us

[8] From One Young World forum, 2016, Bangkok.

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